

BETWEEN PRECARIETY AND OPPORTUNITY: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF 'FLEXIBLE SKILLS' IN INTERACTION DESIGN

Andrea Gaspar

Based on my ethnographic fieldwork in a Milanese interaction design studio I describe how design work is being reimagined through the ambiguous notion of "flexible skills" and I analyse how those "flexible" work practices open up unforeseen possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration between ethnographers and designers.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008-2009, interaction design work in Milan became increasingly precarious and stemming from occasional projects. Flexibility is configured both as a way of dealing with job uncertainty, and also as freedom, autonomy and mobility. The examples I discuss expose this ambiguity, providing insights into the tensions that this reconfiguration of the interaction designer through this figure of flexibility bring about, namely, a tension between older and newer models of action, in which an ethos of improvisation and continuous openness to transformation is sometimes hard to combine with the designers' desire to keep their design-centred conceptions of action and creativity. Flexible skills, thus, are the instrument through which designers articulate an interesting anthropological tension: the tension between precarity and opportunity. Flexible skills challenge designers' modern and hubristic narrative of action (centred on the designer rather than users/people; centred on a cognitive notion of planning) and generates another one, which is based on a continuous openness to adaptation and unpredictability in relation to an (economic, social, professional, cultural) environment and a way of extracting potential from contingent encounters and situations - including my own ethnographic encounter with them. Performing "flexible skills" as a means for generating new opportunities from unpredictable situations, I argue, opens up the *opportunity* for turning the ethnographic encounter with design into a mode of speculatively (Wilkie et al 2017; Dunne & Raby 2013) and experimentally (Estalella & Criado 2018) researching together

Keywords: interaction design, information economy, labour, post-Fordism, flexible skills, ethos of potency, speculative pragmatism, collaborative ethnography, (un)commoning

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"In so far as the world maintains the power of virtuality, it therefore also maintains the capacity to become differently" (Mariam Fraser, 2010: 73)

ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION: DOCUMENTING EMERGENT MEANINGS OF ‘FLEXIBLE SKILLS’ IN INTERACTION DESIGN AFTER CRISIS

This article is an ethnographic approach on how design work in the information economy is being reimagined through the figure of ‘flexible skills’. Based on my fieldwork with a group of interaction designers [1] in Milan I will look at flexibility not as a theoretical construct but through the lens of the designers' use and performance of ‘flexible skills’.

In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, there was less work in the design studio where I did my fieldwork, where the majority of workers were freelance designers and work was being more and more on projects. Flexibility emerges, in this context, simultaneously as an ethnographic vocabulary related with job uncertainty and precariousness, while on the other hand, standing for autonomy, mobility and the seizing of chance as a source of creative opportunities. The examples I will discuss reveal the reconfiguration of designers' identity through this ambiguous figure of flexibility. Adopting a descriptive ethnographic approach, my aim is to reveal what does ‘flexibility’ means from the native's point of view and how it unfolds through diverse ethnographic episodes, offering a situated perspective of how changes in the reconfiguration of employment relations after the Great Recession of 2008 not only affect individuals working specifically on the ICT field (where interaction design is included), but is actively performed by them, opening up new meanings (and new political possibilities): my argument is that these individuals are not only shaped by post-Fordism, but they are also in the process of shaping it, and that is an ongoing open process that ethnographic researchers not only register, but – intentionally or not – have an intervention in. These performances of ‘flexibility’ could be regarded as strategies of normalization of precariousness (see Mrozowicky 2016), however, my argument is that there are other meanings of flexibility being opened by the ethnographic description I bring. Considering those emergent other meanings is important to a contemporary approach to labour [2] as a capitalist relationship. As Harvey and Krohn-Hansen (2018) argue, the ethnographic exploration of the classic labour/capital relation “allows us to extend the reach of the labour concept. It also allows us to explore the diverse ways in which labour relations are experienced beyond the confines of the economic, bringing kinship, personhood, affect, politics, and sociality firmly back into the frame of capitalist value creation” (2018:1). In the context I refer to, flexible skills are about a reconfiguration of

a conception of professional personhood [3]. A look into flexible skills is, thus, one of the ways of extending the reach of the labour concept beyond the confines of the economic. I am interested in bringing to this discussion an analysis of how the disappearance of stable, standard work, in the ICT industries reconfigures foundational understandings between productive work and personhood (including conceptions of agency and professional identity). In what follows I describe the ambiguity of flexibility as related to work precariousness on the one hand (part 1), and to an open conception of agency and skill on the other (part 2), which in turn opens up new possibilities of research intervention through collaborative work between anthropology and design based on speculative pragmatism, as inspired by the local conception of ‘flexible skill’ (part 3).

FLEXIBILITY AS PRECARIOUSNESS

Theorists of the culture of ‘new capitalism’ have shown us how the culture of innovation and creativity of ‘new capitalism’ requires flexible and adaptable people (Leach 2004: 154). Flexibility, however, as the conversation between two workers from the interaction design studio where I stayed exemplifies, emerges as something ambivalent. Veronica, a young designer from Turin, by the time working in the interaction design studio, was looking for a new job. She had seen an advert for a curator in Tate Modern, London and she wanted to hear Osvaldo’s (the head of the studio) advice on the matter, on the occasion of our visit to Turin for a meeting with our partners in a project. I was accompanying Osvaldo in that visit when we met her for a coffee. Osvaldo definitely encouraged Veronica to go abroad, to go where opportunities are. But regarding the advert, quipping, he commented it was “as if she wanted to marry Cristiano Ronaldo”... “The important thing”, he told her, “is to decide in what area of design are you willing to work in, and then apply for what is available”. Veronica agreed, but what she did not seem to be happy with, though, was with the idea of having to undertake such a change in her life, which

included moving away from Italy; overall, she was not happy with the personal unpredictability that a struggle for a career nowadays represents. The conversation followed with Osvaldo trying to convince Veronica that she was “thinking in a traditional way” because the important decision, in his view, was to think about which kind of life she wants, because in his view, “the world of 30 years ago doesn’t exist anymore – the world where people would have a job for life, like the generation of my parents”, a generation in which “people rarely travelled, rarely moved, they lived in the same place for their whole lives and they were very happy with it”.

We could easily frame this example of interaction between Osvaldo and Veronica as just an example of the crisis of a model of work about which we already know about, sociologically speaking. The generational contrast that Osvaldo refers to, indeed, corresponds to the shift from a model of organized capitalism to a ‘flexible’ new one. The Fordist model of work associated with the time of ‘organized capitalism’ entered a crisis (Lash & Urry 1987; Sennett 1998; 2006; Gorz 1999, Hardt 1999; Bauman 2000; Thrift 2005), leading to another one: that of the network – more fluid, dynamic, open, exterritorial, transnational and cosmopolitan. From the perspective of employment relations, this crisis is also often referred to as the end of standard employment relations (SER) [4], in relation to which precarious work “... is best defined as the absence of those aspects of the standard employment relationship (SER) that support the decommodification of labour” (Rubery et al 2018: 510). Osvaldo was trying to convince Veronica that people who design their life plans according to the references of the previous generation will soon find themselves professionally unadapted. What struck me then was that Osvaldo was highlighting work uncertainty as a potential to be explored rather than a limitation, and this deserves to be unfolded ethnographically, which is what I attempt to do with my ethnographic description around his specific deployment of the notion of ‘flexible skills’. As a young woman, I sympathized with Veronica’s

concerns, but it struck me that Osvaldo seemed to be focused on the optimistic side of unpredictable work, which he regarded as something that some people take a choice. So he pointed Veronica the example of Lisen, a designer from the studio who was by the time moving to Qatar, who decided to take an interesting job opportunity, and then he turned to me as another example, who also moved across different countries for doing the PhD and the fieldwork. Veronica commented that it was not that she did not want to change environment or have a more international kind of experience, her problem was the impossibility of designing her own life: she clarified that she was concerned with “the impossibility of making personal life plans”, such as “starting a family and having children”. Although I did not interfere in the conversation, I felt sensitive to Veronica’s concerns and I was very impressed with what seemed to me Osvaldo’s lack of sensitivity to Veronica’s point of view. He epitomized to me the gendered side of ‘new capitalism’, and by the time, I regarded him as personifying the volatility and the predicament of new capitalist life (in the sense provided by Sennett 2006), and thus embodying the ambiguities of ‘flexibility’. Dwelling in a world where constant change is a reality for him, permanence and stability – either in a career or in a geographic territory – were being despised by him because they are concerned with ‘what is’ rather than ‘what can be’, which draws out attention to the notion of ‘ethos of potency’ (Sennett 2006). The ethos of potency (which I discuss further in more detail), is theorized as being the source of capitalist culture of creativity, and thus is associated to a conception of action more open to change and improvisation than the Fordist, rational and planned one. The ethos of potency, if used as a concept to interpret Osvaldo’s use of ‘flexibility’, would lead us to see his discourse as just one example of post-Fordist normalization of precariousness, but that is not the end of the story.

FLEXIBILITY AS ‘FLEXIBLE SKILLS’

In the literature dedicated to the social studies of work, it is often assumed that flexibility refers to

non-standard employment, where it is employed as another name for precariousness. From this point of view, we could interpret the conversation between Osvaldo and Veronica as a conflict between strategies of resistance to post-Fordist precariousness (by Veronica) and strategies of coping with this regime, ‘normalizing’ it (by Osvaldo). According to Mrozowicki (2016: 101), “Normalization of precariousness is a biographical process formed by a configuration of factors which on a subjective level justify the unstable employment of informants and on the objective level contribute to the development of a set of coping practices aimed at minimising the biographic costs and tensions related to it”. Normalization does not mean the lack of criticism of precariousness, he argues, however, “it changes the understanding of a ‘normal career’” (ibid). Taking a closer look to Osvaldo’s practices, however, other meanings and political possibilities of flexibility emerge which are not solely concerned with non-standard, precarious work – although those aspects are intimately related -, in a picture which troubles the taken-for-granted assumed dichotomy between normalization and resistance characteristic of the debates about post-Fordist work [5]. In his discourse and practices, flexibility emerges also in relation to views of creativity and agency, beyond the issues of precarious employment relations.

One of the specificities of this design context is what I term elsewhere a design-centred conception of creativity and innovation (Gaspar 2018), that is, a view that the design creative agency depends mostly on individual subjective will and genius creativity. This dominant narrative about creativity tends to locate creativity and agency in the mind, which in turn is conceived as separated from ‘the world’ outside of it. This underlying conception of creativity is also on the basis of a temporal rhetorics of ‘change’, ‘transformation’, ‘innovation’ and ‘the new’ that pervades design (Mazé 2016: 39). In the specific context I analyse (the milanese interaction design studio and their extended network of relations), indeed the designers’ discourse on their creative process is highly hubristic, considered as

something produced and derived from a subjective-mental processes rather than from social context, people, or material non-human entities (factors that are considered external, passive, mere tools of designers' intervention). Also, in this conception, where design subjects consider themselves as the main agents of change and innovation, users are not attributed an active role in the design process. The expressed philosophy of the designers within the studio is, indeed, characterized by a prioritization of the conceptual over the practical and phenomenological processes: the official studio's motto is "form follows fiction" [6], (quipping with the modernist motto "form follows function"). However, this narrative of action and creativity was many times contradicted with their practices, where other ways of dealing with chance, uncertainty and contingent relations with the environment, are often involved: it is to these practices that I now turn my focus on. I often heard Osvaldo saying that "the myth of the genius individual creator is a lie", and for that reason "social skills are the most basic skills of a designer". We need to look at details to understand what does he mean by "social skills" and "flexible skills".

One could be tempted to think that by "social skills" Osvaldo could be referring to developing empathy with the users or participants of a design project, as it is considered in design fields such as participatory design (which I refer further in more detail along this text), however, that is not the case.

One example of what he means by "social and flexible skills" emerges from the interactions that a project for the creation of a new design school in Turin provided. The negotiations for this project were ongoing with a partner of Osvaldo's network of relationships, entrepreneurs from Turin in the real estate business. His idea was to create an independent private design school for post-graduate students but where the students would not have to pay for doing their courses because the school would be highly selective, as there would be a very restricted limit of students [7]. Since Osvaldo was already the director of the design department of an

Arts Academy in Milan, his plan was to associate the new design school in Turin to the milanese one, though he still needed to convince his partners about this possibility. I thereby accompanied him a couple of times to meetings in Turin with his friends – a task that had been assigned to me was the production of materials in English for the new school. The purpose of those first meetings was to convince his friends of associating 'the School' to the project. In one of those first meetings, on our way to Turin he explained me the setting: we were going to meet with Claudio and Marcello. Marcello, who is Claudio's boss, is an architect and belongs to a family of entrepreneurs from Turin who own and manage a wide range of spaces in the city, [8] and one of those was intended for the new school. Before meeting with Marcello, we had an informal talk with Claudio who joined us for lunch, and that was when the strategy and the possibilities of forming a partnership were discussed. It was during this conversation that Osvaldo's association of flexible skills with social skills emerged.

Claudio wanted to understand if the strategy was to divide the work according to each partner's experiences, or if they would rather be working collectively. According to Osvaldo, "the work should be collective because it is a new kind of work, work of a kind that didn't exist before", so he advocated for the creation of a society (for managing the school) because, in his words, "the architect is not the one who makes the architecture plan anymore – he is rather the one who puts things into operation". After a short visit to the building that was designated for the school, a beautiful eighteenth century hospital just across the street owned by the family of Marcello, the interests of those gathered were a little divided. Marcello was concerned with the management system and was trying to think of who might be interested in funding such a project – stressing however that he would restore the building whether the new school project would go ahead or not. Osvaldo, in turn, was more interested in discussing what the school was going to be beforehand. It is in this occasion that the notion of "practical competences", such as "social skills", and

the view of the designer as “the one who puts things into operation” became the center of the discussion.

They all agreed on excluding the possibility of centering the design school in product design – to Osvaldo, it should be something else because “in Turin either we go with the mechanical industry, the car industry, or we go in the direction of a new industry” – which they thought was the way. However, Marcello and Claudio were thinking of the new school based precisely on an already assumed notion that design is based on acquiring specialized knowledge. Osvaldo wanted to discourage his partners from the view that the school would produce experts with technical skills, which he argued as obsolete. The sort of practical competences that he defended for that ‘new industry’ did not seem to correspond to the conventional idea of practical skills: “(the idea) is not for specializing oneself – as a photographer, cook, etc, but like in xxx [the former Interaction Design Institute in Italy from which the studio, where I was doing my fieldwork, was a spin-off], one learns a diversity of skills”. “the aim here is not to educate people to be able to invent great things or be great communicators, but to be able to make things work in the real world, to be able to map problems, to map opportunities”. His point was that the content of what one knows does not matter – or matters less than what we may do with it. He argued that in the traditional Italian university system there used to be a ‘thinking’ which is often disconnected from the process of ‘doing’, so the alternative in his view could be teaching people to think while making stuff, which allow for the learning of more practical skills: “This was the philosophy of the xxx [Interactive Design Institute], where you wouldn’t become a technological ‘expert’, but it would make you able to communicate with the expertise”. We learn, therefore, that Osvaldo’s conception of practical competences is not the same thing as technical ones, but rather what he terms as “putting things in practice/operation”. “Traditional education privileges skills, which was fine to the world of some decades ago, however, technical knowledge and specialization do not suffice nowadays”. His view is

that ‘having ideas’ does not require any form of specialized knowledge, thus the question is how to educate people for generating the new: “For example, when someone develops a camera which downloads directly into You Tube, it’s not a question of technical education which is at stake, it’s something different and so it is important to understand why some are successful and others aren’t”.

His arguments resonated me the idea of flexible specialization (also known as Toyotism), the post-Fordist idea that it is production should adapt to the market, instead of the market adapting to production: “Flexible specialization is the antithesis of the system of production embodied in Fordism, where the assembly line is substituted by islands of specialized production” (Sennett 1998: 51). Flexible specialization, in short, is business quickly responding to changes in consumer demand; it is adapting production to the demands of consumption – to where the notion of ‘immaterial work’ is situated – immaterial work requires precisely the kind of skills that Osvaldo was referring to.

The notion of practical, flexible skills as opposed to specialized skills permeated the discussion, for example when Claudio objected to Osvaldo’s arguments: “But we live in a very specialized world...”, it becomes clear that Claudio’s reference is the Fordist model of economy based on centralized on production. Flexible specialization, instead, by being modeled on consumption rather than production, requires the sort of flexible skills that Osvaldo was defending. Osvaldo thus seemed to me by the time to personify some of the tenets of a neoliberal version of creative businesses: he “already lives in a world” [9] (that is, in a particularly imagined kind of future) where there is not any labour force nor industrial production involved in the design process, only ideas and consumers of those ideas. From this point of view, Osvaldo was reproducing post-Fordism by making a distinction between services and products, which is also a distinction between immaterial work and material one, that is, a transition from Fordist work

to post-Fordist one, and therefore he was enacting the idea that the main sources of profits are ideas, rather than material objects (Bauman 2000: 151). Within this framework, we could also interpret design as an activity that turned into project management: project management, as Nigel Thrift (2008: 38) reminds, has been one of the strategies attempting to extend the signature of the commodity:

“More and more companies are becoming like project co-ordinators, outsourcing the ‘business-as-usual’ parts of their operations so that they can be left free to design and orchestrate new ideas, aided by new devices like product life-cycle software which allow product designs to be rapidly changed. Nike, for instance, does not make shoes anymore; it manages footwear projects. Coca-cola, which hands most of the bottling and marketing of its drinks to others, is little more than a collection of projects, run by people it calls ‘orchestrators’.”

(The Economist 2005c: 66, quoted in ibid.)

Turned into project management, design work shifts from a ‘specialized’ activity – for example in product, fashion or architecture – to a form of ‘orchestration’ of teams and ideas that uses these forms of knowledge as an instrument. Thus, it makes sense that in the design business, other ‘virtues’ became more valued, such as relational capacity and ‘soft skills’ (Thrift 2005; 2008; Sennett 1998), as well as leadership in ‘teamwork’ promoting ‘collaboration’. Are the ‘flexible skills’ that Osvaldo refers to the same thing as a management version of ‘soft skills’? Is he just reproducing post-Fordism?

The ethos of potency

A characteristic of new capitalism, Thrift reminds us, is that “value increasingly arises not from what is but from what is not yet but can potentially become, that is from the pull of the future, and from the new distributions of the sensible that can arise from that

change” (2008: 31). Osvaldo’s notion of ‘practical competences’ also involve a different temporality as they are oriented to ‘future-making’ (Born 2007): indeed, by ‘practical competences’ he was referring to a capacity that is more concerned with personal potential rather than experience and accumulated knowledge: a capacity that is concerned with process and operation rather than with content (it matters less what we know than what we may do with it); and with the virtual (potential, what can be), rather than the actual. Practical competences, which appear as the opposite of doing something well for its own sake, implies the end of a professional career based on technical knowledge and cumulative improvements and are against past achievement: they are concerned with exploiting possibilities unforeseen by others. Sennett (2006) conceptualizes these possibilities as an ‘ethos of potency’ which becomes dominant within ‘new’ capitalist culture, an ethos that is modeled on consumption rather than production and where “The talent searcher (...) is less interested in what you already know, but more in how much you might be able to learn; the personnel director is less interested in what you already do than in who you might become” (ibid: 156).

The narrative of action and creativity that Osvaldo performs through this notion of practical skills also resonates with a vision that innovation and “growth doesn’t happen in that neat, bureaucratically planned way”, as American techies would say (Sennett 1998: 62), which is also the view that there is not a method or any specific knowledge needed to come up with good ideas, but rather other sorts of skills (flexible skills) are required. To some extent, this justifies his stress on the importance of exposing people to potential networks and future possibilities – rather than teaching traditional skills such as product design, graphic design etc – and to invite important designers for talks as a way of stimulating partnerships, future connections. His vision is that ideas are more likely to emerge from unpredictable encounters, networks and partnerships than from organized planning. Thus, through his notion of flexible/practical skills, a

different way of dealing with temporality (based on openness and potentiality rather than on linear, predictable modern time) unfolds, a temporality that is concerned with the future, the virtual, and with becomings rather than beings. However, arguing that Osvaldo's use of 'flexible skills' is a mode of reproducing post-fordist culture is too simplistic. Paying closer attention to how his notion of practical competences unfolds, as I do in the next section, we realise how it involves a certain degree of improvisation, a way of dealing with unforeseen possibilities (Akama et al 2018), which should not be politically and epistemically underestimated.

"FLEXIBLE SKILLS" AS A MODE OF SPECULATIVE PRAGMATISM

Reconfiguring the designer as someone able to extract potential from contingent encounters and dealing with the not-yet resonates with the recent speculative pragmatism in social sciences. Speculation, in social sciences' vocabulary, refers broadly to a philosophy, an aesthetics and a sensibility to generate the new through research. The interest in social sciences for the speculative comes from the philosophy of science (mainly from A. N. Whitehead, I. Stengers and G. Deleuze), but also from design: speculative design in particular emerged as a challenge to user-centred and functionalist assumptions dominant in a modern rational planning model of design. The function of the speculative in design is not to provide techno-aesthetic solutions to pre-defined problems or to 'domesticate' technical inventions, but rather to mobilise design as a 'catalyst for social dreaming' (Dunne & Raby 2013: 189). Social sciences are borrowing this temporality to their own ways of producing knowledge whereby the empirical is understood through a different temporal lens, approached as something in becoming. The interest in the speculative, either in design or social research, is concerned with a resistance to the linearity of modern time (Savransky et al 2017: 4) and the rational predictability that is associated to this particular model of time: "Resisting the modern arrow of time matters because it enables us to

consider temporality as it is formed through its own patterns of becoming rather than through the imposition of a preformatted geometry" (ibid).

Speculative research involves thus the cultivation of an eventful sensibility (Michael 2012a; 2012b) or as Savransky et al put it, it is a pragmatics that generates eventful temporalities (2017: 7). Concerned with a different temporal relation to the empirical, the speculative sensibility can be understood as a device for opening up futures, rather than predicting them or closing them down; the speculative sensibility is part of a non-representational approach to the empirical in social sciences, an approach that is not just descriptive of a 'reality', but it is rather ontological, interventive, generative of new realities. Speculative sensibility is described as learning how to work out from the contingencies; a pragmatics that involves acting on possibilities and demands "(...) new habits and practices of attention, invention and experimentation" (Savransky et al 2017: 2) and "modes of relating to the not-yet" (ibid.: 5), which resonate the views of Osvaldo and his point about the need for design education to create conditions of possibility for new encounters and new ideas rather than simply teaching technical skills.

An example of speculative pragmatism – which is not just descriptive and representational of an existing reality (post-Fordism, in this case), but something which turns into a speculative mode of ethnographic relationship – emerged in the following situation: at some point, Osvaldo invited me to participate in another project. He had been in charge of the BA in design at 'the School' for three years now, and his superiors wanted him to propose a MA to follow this BA. There was already one Master's in Product Design, but they wanted to create a new one under Osvaldo's tutelage. He needed to convince the managers in the art academy, where he was in charge of the design department, that a new Masters' course on 'community-based design' would be preferable to the existing one on 'exhibition design', and thus he invited me to be part of the process. Osvaldo was

not a genuine enthusiast of community-based design, also known as participatory design [10] (a movement that emerged in the 1970's in Scandinavia and which had a widespread influence in many areas of design since then), although he appropriates it strategically, as it was the case, for the situation at hand. In the field of participatory design, working with communities is a political act [11] (Simonsen and Robertson 2012) that entails democratization of production (Söderberg and Maxigas 2014: 6) in a variety of design fields, but Osvaldo did not invoke this approach as a conviction. The reason for his invocation of community-based design was because, by the time, he had been to a meeting in Cornwall, England, where the studio had applied for a competition for a work on community and participatory design. Although the studio did not win that competition, Osvaldo understood the value of community-based design from a practical, strategic point of view, in the sense that he perceived there was funding and there were jobs for that specific area, although he did not identify with those approaches: user-centred design", according to him, "does not make a difference conceptually and in terms of creativity and innovation" (a view which presupposes an hubristic conception of innovation as discussed above), "but it is rather used as an instrument of communication – a way of showing potential investors or clients that the design process has been ethical and democratic" [12]. This process, however, in his opinion, does not necessarily achieve better ideas: according to him, there is not a rule nor a method for "having good ideas", which to him equates to a sort of mysterious and unpredictable process. Participatory design is, according to him, "something that makes sense for the north (of Europe, and America), but not in a context such as in Italy" [13]. However, he somehow identified me as a 'natural' advocate of participatory design because of my training as an anthropologist – therefore, something he could 'use' for a particular purpose. By the time, although he knew me enough to know that it was necessarily so (being there as an ethnographer of design, I did not compromise with any specific design approach nor school), he saw

community/participatory design as something about which I could claim some skills due to my training, and in that regard, at that specific moment I was ready to hand and he saw me as 'useful'. Coping with that, because my fieldwork relationships depended on this pragmatic flexibility of roles, I from then on played the role of a sort of advocate of community-based design, as it was expected from me, in order to see what would come out from this interplay. At moments like this one, my ethnography shifted from mere observational description to experimentation, or more specifically, to what Estalella and Criado (2018) identify as situations of experimental collaboration in ethnographic fieldwork, involving a research relation that is not characterized by the simple separation between researcher and informant anymore [14], but rather a relation turned into a process that is more akin to a reflexive partnership (although not always in the same tune, as it was the case). Both what Osvaldo refers to (flexible skills as the mode of operation able to turn chance into possibility) and my own pragmatic mode of action in regard to my ethnographic relationship at that point resonate with what Isabelle Stengers and other speculative researchers name as speculative pragmatism, which could be defined as the art of the event [15], or in other words, a sensibility towards transforming contingent conditions into new possibilities [16] – in this case, the creation of conditions for new possibilities of work in this area, either for designers or for social scientists, like me; the opening up of the possibility of a collaborative work between design and anthropology. It is this sort of 'skills' that Osvaldo was trying to explain to his partners in the previously described situation: the art of the event, a capacity to create new entities from contingent encounters and unpredictable, uncontrollable situations; flexible skills, as a speculative pragmatism, can be seen as an interstitial practice: a condition that allows for events to emerge (Doucet et al 2008: 12).

Let me illustrate, however, the issue of speculative pragmatism (defined as the art of the event) in more detail. The conversations with the managers of the

art academy were already on going, partially through e-mail, which he would frequently forward me, in order to engage me in the conversation. Trying to learn about what I should do, at some point I understood that there were no specific tasks assigned to me: what he wanted from me was simply to be involved in the conversation, raising questions as a way of generating ideas to him and arguments he could then use to negotiate with the design department. I realised he did not even want me to help him preparing those arguments explicitly, nor did he present me the people he was trying to convince to engage in the debate: what he wanted from me was really the possibility for discussion through a sort of frictional, idiotic interaction (Gaspar 2018). As I tended to question him permanently, and often tried to challenge his assumptions, what he was interested was precisely in the idiotic [17] disturbances I was able to create on his thought process. My point is that this openness to the effects of an interaction (and the possibility of mutual change) is both a revealing example of what he means by flexible, social, practical skills and, at the same time, it is the effect of my own appropriation of this native category to my own research process.

The email exchange proceeded with a discussion between the Director of 'the School', who proposed the creation of a Masters in Exhibition Design, and Osvaldo, who was attempting to convince her that a course in Community Design was preferable. With myself on the background, questioning his design-centered innovation model and engaging in parallel discussions (about for example, the assumptions on which he relied for the notion of community), the arguments he brought for convincing the school manager were that there are now other challenges to the traditional way, where the designer worked for a company or an institution; 'designing with communities', on the other hand, requires a new design professional with broader and transversal competences beyond the sectorialization that design has traditionally been ascribed.

"In the previous world, the designer was that gentleman who designs things that common people use. In today's world, the designer is that gentleman (or that lady), who together with several groups of people (communities of practices), gives shape to needs and desires more or less latent and/or expressed: designing a street performance festival, games for children in the park, a car-sharing service, the little house that later becomes the headquarters of the neighborhood bowling team. From this point of view, one is talking about a new professional: the designer understood as a facilitator of processes, that guy who enables groups of people to develop their own projects in the best way possible."

"The designer who works for a community", he continued, "corresponds to an orchestration of relationships that brings different possibilities and opportunities for the younger generation of designers".

"what I'm interested in discussing with you [school managers] is the possibility a space for this idea of a new design professional who is able to become a "facilitator": the designer together with a community of people develops project x, which from time to time, can be turned into the form of product, service, exhibition, performance, etc. (in respect to the needs/desires of a given community)" (e-mail, my translation).

Osvaldo's argument then was that the designer does not need to be an expert in community issues (as much as she/he does not need to specialize in product or exhibition design): the designer's role is rather a relational one, not only in the social sense – and therefore his idea of 'social skills' as the capacity to articulate people in networks, projects and teams – but also in a 'practical' one, that is, in the sense of making new combinations where new outcomes can potentially arise (speculative pragmatism), which is a different version of (job)

uncertainty that was described at the beginning of this text: uncertainty is now turned into a source of potential opportunity for generating a creative social process, and this is intimately concerned with what he considers flexible (that is, social and practical) skills. From an epistemic point of view, at this point we seemed to have shifted positions because extracting potential from contingent encounters and situations and turning chance into opportunity is usually part of the ethnographic craft. It should now be clear that what I am describing is not just Osvaldo's reproduction of post-Fordism and the performance of its corollary ethos of potency: what I am describing as speculative pragmatism is a process of mutual change and an effect of my own research. Turning contingencies into opportunities (both what I did and what Osvaldo did in this situation) is a gesture that has a generative political potential (because it is where the capacity for change lies), although subtle, as Stengers put it, for the "The politics of the interstices belongs at the level of the meso" (ibid: 27) (and therefore escape the traditional dualism between hegemony and resistance) but they can disturb a normal order and bring other possibilities into being – including other work regime possibilities, for example, including collaborative possibilities of a common work between anthropology and design. Learning about Osvaldo's understanding of the design process as something that is not simply considered a product of intellectual property nor something individually performed and based on technical skills (which also complicates what seemed to be a hubristic, design-centred discourse), but rather as a contingent, interactive, collaborative, phenomenological and open-ended process, in fact, shares much in common with the ethnographic process and thus brought me the perspective on what a process of ethnographic knowledge commons as an alternative model of knowledge production could be. As Apleton and Gibson (2019) highlight in regard to commoning with/in ethnography, dissonance (where we could include idiotic encounters) is an integral part of the process of commoning, referring to an emergent conversation on uncommoning (Blaser and Cadena

2017, cited in ibid). The emergent conversation on uncommoning, according to these authors, "helps us see that to common is not about flattening or settling, but rather about continually making space for dissonance and unsettling" (2019: 2). The dissonances that I generated during the discussion of a new Masters' programme through the conversations with Osvaldo had epistemic and ontological effects, and hence they work simultaneously as an example of what Osvaldo terms as 'flexible skills' and at the same time, an example of what a speculative pragmatism (the art of the event) is, both in relation to the research process (a mutual transformation) and in relation to the coming into being of new work possibilities (collaborative opportunities between anthropology and design).

CONCLUSION: THE SPECULATIVE POTENTIAL OF FLEXIBLE SKILLS

The ethnographic examples I discussed in this article explore how design work in the informational economy is being refashioned as a mode of adapting to the circumstances one encounters and interacting with it, where flexible skills emerge as a matter of improvisation rather than planning. The flexibilization of skills that Osvaldo refers to are concerned with his own way of dealing with the uncertainty of his professional world, not just as a way of surviving in it, but as a matter of generating potential from it – which opens up something akin to a speculative pragmatism in social sciences' recent epistemic debates (Wilkie et al 2017; Akama et al 2018), which approach knowledge production as based on the same premises (based on the lure of potentiality and the exploration of uncertainty to generate knowledge opportunities, or Martin Savransky puts it, referring to speculative pragmatism (2017: 30), an "experimental mode of harnessing experience such that new intelligent connections among things may become possible"). The ethnographic details provided in this text offer us insight into the economic culture where these new approaches to knowledge are produced, inviting us to see academia as something that is not

necessarily external to its cultural-economic culture, but rather performative of it, a condition which in turn opens a political opportunity for researchers to approach their research as open-ended speculative interventions rather than closed representational descriptive processes. I believe that the epistemic uncertainty of this ethnographic relationship opens up the opportunity to conceive another kind of ethnographic relationship, one that goes beyond the aim of descriptive representation to engage in experiments with the uncertainties of speculative collaboration. Can the example of this epistemic encounter inspire other kinds of research relationships that would involve a sort of 'commoning' labour between the ethnographer and the 'ethnographed' reflexive research subjects? Could those relationships become something akin to peer production, with designers and ethnographers working towards a "collaborative formation of issues" (Kjaersgaard et al 2016: 9), opening space for collaboration as a commoning interdisciplinary knowledge practice?

END NOTES

[1] Interaction Design (IxD), the design of the interactions between users and products, is part of the ICT industry: the field is related to other proximate areas such as Human Computer Interaction (HCI), User Experience, Service Design and Critical/Speculative Design.

[2] For a genealogy of the concept of labour and the english-speaking distinction between 'work' and 'labour', see Narotzki 2018. "English-speaking scholars have often been using a distinction between 'work' and 'labour', where labour is defined as human effort which pertains to capitalist relations of production, and work describes the rest of human energy expenditure in relation to non-capitalist realms, whether these be reproductive tasks (which eventually became subsumed by the 'care' concept) or socially relevant, non-market-orientated tasks (generally but not solely productive) in the margins and interstices of the capitalist market system or in non-capitalist historical or present-day

societies" (Narotzky 2018: 3-4).

[3] Harvey and Krohn-Hansen (2018:1) refer to these reconfiguration processes as a process of capitalist dislocation: "By dislocation we refer to the unevenness of transnational capitalism's unfolding and the ways in which both places and persons are reconfigured by the movements of capital. Dislocation thus refers to the spatial movements of refugees and migrant workers, but also to other senses of disruption, such as the sentiment of feeling out of place, or of losing your bearings as things move and change around you."

[4] According to Rubery et al (2018), "the essence of the SER is found not in its habitual form of full-time permanent work but in its substantive protections against a pure market relationship, jointly provided by employers and the state through employment rights and social protection" (protections which, according to them, "range from guarantees of sufficient income during work and non-work periods to limit pressures to sell labour under disadvantageous market conditions, to providing a platform for mutual investment in skills"). Precarious work, in contrast, they argue, "is associated with low pay, insufficient and variable hours, short term contracts and limited social protection rights. These characteristics are frequently found in, but not confined to, what are known as non-standard forms of employment (NSFE), including part-time, temporary and zero hours contracts and dependent self-employment" (ibid).

[5] The problem with the 'normalization of precariousness' approach is that it implies a dichotomy between hegemony and resistance, which in turn is based on a vision of power relations that forecloses other possible modes of transformation, namely, the speculative pragmatism (or, "the care of the possible", in the words of Isabelle Stengers, 2011) that I refer further in this text. Speculative pragmatism opens up more subtle political practices that Pignarre and Stengers (2005) refer to as being practices of the interstice or a mesopolitics (Pignarre and Stengers 2005),

something that escapes simplistic dualisms.

[6] In conceptual design, form is given less importance than meaning, the concept: this is the reason why Osvaldo and Lisen, two of the project managers of the studio, claimed that “design is not about form or materiality, but it is rather about fiction” because in their view, “we don’t need new objects: what we need is new stories for the existing ones” (fieldnotes, Gaspar, 2009).

[7] This project was inspired in the Mountain School of Arts in Los Angeles.

[8] Turin is the perfect set for the performance of post-industrial capitalism: the city was once known as the Italian Leningrad due to its intense industrialism – the city of Fiat. However, since the automobile crisis of the late nineties and through campaigns of urban branding, the city has been very active in strategically promoting the image of a creative, ‘cool’ city to attract the ‘creative classes’, thus celebrating ideas of a cultural, post-industrial economy (Vanolo 2008: 370).

[9] An expression he used quite often.

[10] Participatory design is an approach that aims to be socially inclusive and promotes user empowerment: “Participatory design is about the direct involvement of people in the co-design of the information technologies they use. Its central concern is how collaborative design processes can be driven by the participation of the people who will be affected by the technology that is being designed” (Simonsen and Robertson 2012: xix). Moreover, participatory design research “focuses on ‘drawing things together’ (Binder et al. 2001) through situated activities and iterative transformation” (Smith and Otto 2016: 19).

[11] “Participatory design has always given primacy to human action and people’s rights to participate in the shaping of the world in which they act” (Simonsen and Robertson 2012: 4) “The political rationale for genuine participation in design reflects a commitment to ensuring that the voices of

marginalised groups and communities are heard in decision-making processes that will affect them” (idem: 6)

[12] Conversations registered through the author’s ethnographic fieldnotes, 2009.

[13] He refers to the dominant – individual and authorial – model of design agency: in contrast to other design traditions, design in Italy is considered an artistic field, rather than a scientific or applied social science.

[14] Holmes and Marcus (2008) characterize these research relationships as para-ethnographic.

[15] I refer here to Deleuze’s notion of event: “a moment at which its component entities rather than simply ‘being together’ also ‘become together’; “the event can be characterized by a sort of mutual changing” (Michael and Rosengarten 2014: 351). About the notion of event and event thinking, see also Fraser 2010.

[16] According to Isabelle Stengers, pragmatism is the care of the possible, meaning that the care of the event, “from which the situation can receive this power (...) requires a whole culture of artifice...” (Stengers 2011: 27).

[17] In the Deleuzian sense (see Gaspar 2018).

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