Labor in an informational economy: an ethnographic encounter with interaction designers' conception of 'flexible skills'

This article is an ethnographic description on how design work in a neoliberal information economy is being reimagined through the figure of 'flexible skills'. Based on my fieldwork with a group of interaction designers in Milan I will focus specifically on the designers' conception and practical use of 'flexible skills'.

With the economic crisis at the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, there was less work in design: work was being more and more on projects. Flexibility emerges on the one hand as a vocabulary related with job uncertainty, precariousness and the impossibility of designing a life, while on the other hand it means autonomy and mobility and mobilizing chance as creative opportunities. The examples I will discuss reveal how the reconfiguration of the designer through this figure of flexibility reveals tensions between older and newer conceptions of action, in which the improvisation and continuous openness to transformation that flexible work requires is sometimes hard to combine with these designers' desire to keep their classic design-centered conceptions of creativity. At the same time, the ways in which flexibility is performed as an open-ended view of action and subjecthood ressembles the epistemic approaches to knowledge-making that we could deploy to analyse this pehonomenon, such as the anthropological theories of practice (Schatzki et al 2001; Bloor 2001; Knorr Cetina 2001) actor-network-theory (Latour 2005), or the recent speculative philosophy and speculative research (Wilkie et al 2017) and anthropological ways of generating research opportunities from uncertain encounters and situations (Akama et al 2018) - echoes of these speculative approaches to human action can be found in the open-to-contingency model of design entrepreneurship that designers perform, which blurrs the epistemic distinction between analysis and 'object' of analysis.

Performing (ambivalent) flexibility: between precarity and opportunity

The 'new' culture of innovation and creativity requires flexible and adaptable people (Leach 2004: 154), traits that are performed by designers through an open-ended conception of personhood. Flexibility, however, as the conversation between two workers from the interaction design studio exemplifies, emerges something ambivalent. Veronica was a young designer from Turin, working in the interaction design studio, who was looking for a new job. She had seen an advert for a curator in Tate Modern, London, and thus, 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, he commented it was as if she wanted to marry Cristiano Ronaldo: "the probabilities are one in a million", he told her. The important thing to consider, he said, was to decide in what area of design she would be willing to work in, and then apply for what is available. What she was not happy with, she told, was with the idea of having to undertake such a change in her life, which included moving away from Italy. Osvaldo tried to convince Veronica that she was "thinking in a traditional way". The important decision, he told her, is to think about which kind of life she wants, because according to him, "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". Making a sharp distinction between the present and the past, Osvaldo talked about the past as a world where "people rarely travelled, rarely moved, they lived in the same place for their whole lives and they were very happy with it".

The generational contrast that Osvaldo refers is also the contrast between a model of organized capitalism and a 'flexible' new one. The Fordist conception of work associated with the time of 'organized capitalism', according to many authors, 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. One of the ways in which interaction designers perform that crisis is through the notion of flexible skills. 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. Osvaldo was highlighting uncertainty as a strength and not as a limitation: he mentioned Lisen, a designer from the studio who was by the time moving to Qatar, as an example of a new generation that is more adaptable and open to the contemporary circumstances, and then he turned to me as another example, who had also moved to another country for the PhD, and then once again being there for 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 planning her life: "having kids, a family, etc.". This is where the ambivalence of flexible work in design comes into play: flexibility is

sometimes praised, meaning freedom from geographic, national and territorial constraints, a question of personal autonomy and free-will; and other times feared when it refers to precarious and unstable work conditions. These ambivalent feelings towards flexibility cohabit in very specific ways in the world of contemporary design. The conflict that Veronica was expressing is common to the contemporary design and creative businesses context, where young workers do not identify themselves with having a fixed job for life, they rather nourish other values such as flux, flow, constant change, and they use other metaphors to describe their life in relation to previous generations, like Osvaldo does. But while on the one side freedom is celebrated (professional autonomy, mobility), on the other the constraint that this freedom entails – uncertainty (no jobs guaranteed) and risk, the impossibility of planning their lives like the previous generations did (centered on family, class, community, work stability, etc.) is expressed. What the conflict between Veronica and Osvaldo exposes is the ambivalence of flexibility in design and creative industries more broadly (de Peuter 2011) – it is where an optimistic ideology of technological progress collides with a pessimistic one, based on uncertainty and job insecurity. Veronica stands here for the rational, calculated mode of action towards life-plans and professional career while Osvaldo, in contrast, celebrates unpredictability and improvisation, performing a mode of action capable of dealing with unpredictability and openness, an aspect wich I will now turn to in more detail through the analysis of his deployment of flexible skills and what it means in design.

Flexible skills and the 'ethos of potency'

One of the specificities of this design context is designers' design-centred conception of creativity and innovation (Gaspar 2018; Gaspar 2013), in which users do not usually play a role in the design process. The designers' creative process comes rather from within mental processes rather than from without – context, people, etc. As their motto "form follows function" expresses, emphasis is put on the conceptual and the fictional rather than the functional. For a long time I was struck by this prioritization between the conceptual over the practical, and the fact that their design process is usually based on the project that is made in advance, where ideas are worked out in advance and then they adapt the world to their ideas rather than the reverse. However, this quite modern mode of action sometimes collided with other ideas: for example, often I heard saying that "the myth of the genius individual creator is a lie" and that "social skills are the most basic skills of a designer", as Osvaldo frequently put it.

Osvaldo particularly embodies the ambiguities associated with the idea of 'flexibility' – he personifies the volatility and the predicament of new capitalist life

that is based on an open mode of action. He dwells in a world where change and flexibility are a reality for him: he is not just adapting to it, nor embodying it – he is performing it – he brings it into being through his work practices, ethos, and design work. Permanence and stability – either in a career based on technical skills or in a geographic territory - are despised because they are concerned with 'what is' rather than 'what can be' – the ethos of potency (Sennett 2006). The ethos of potency, which is the source of capitalist culture of creativity, requires a different conception of action, more based on improvisation and unpredictable ways of acting rather than more rational, planned ones. A good expression of what the ethos of potency means in what regards to work comes with Osvaldo's idea that what matters in a design career is not any form of possession or achievement – of knowledge, of skills – he stresses that design is *putting things in operation* (referring to social skills).

Putting things in operation:'practice' as a para-ethnographic concept

One example of ethos of potency 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[1]: there would be a very restricted limit of students. Since Osvaldo was already the director of the design department of an Arts Academy in Milan, his plan was now to associate that design school to the new design school in Turin, 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 would be producing the 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,[2] and one of those was intended for the new school. Before meeting with Marcello, we had an informal talk with Claudio who we joined us for lunch, where the strategy

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

[2] 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).

and the possibilities of forming a partnership were discussed. It was during this conversation that Osvaldo's view of flexibility emerged again: Claudio wanted to understand if the strategy was to divide the work in parallel 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 familly 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. As it unfolds, this notion of practical competences involves a certain degree of improvisation, a way of dealing with unforeseen possibilities (*what can be*, rather than *what is*) (Akama et al 2018). They all agree 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 is an obsolete view. Practical competences – the sort of skills required for that 'new industry' – do not 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". To him, the point was that in the traditional Italian university system there is this '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*: "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". That is how Osvaldo reveals is view that *practical competences* are not the same thing as technical ones, but rather *putting things in practice/operation*. The point of Osvaldo was that 'having ideas' does not require any form of specialized knowledge, thus his question is how to educate people for generating innovation: "traditional education

privileges skills, which was fine to the world of some decades ago", however, technical knowledge and specialization do not suffice nowadays. "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".

Intrigued with this notion of 'practical competences', I asked him about it later that day, on our way back to the train station. He then offered me the example of Silverio, one of the founders and shareholders of 'the Studio' in Turin. "Silverio is a talented videographer", he says, "but that's the only thing he does: he is good at it and he is very proud of his work but he is not willing to do anything else, which is a very middle-class kind of mentality", he says. I asked him what other things Silverio should do. He gives me an example: the previous year Silverio had been invited by the CEO of the interaction design studio to produce some videos for her husband, who is a very powerful man, not only in political life – he is a center-left senator – but also in media business: he is the owner of very important media groups, and so he needed some videos for *Cofindustria* (the Italian industrial organization). Silverio made those videos and they were a success: the senator was very happy with the result. However, the seantors' wife became furiously angry with Silverio in the end because he was not present at the party where the videos were shown – "he only had to show up, but he didn't care". To Osvaldo the point is that Silverio does not understand that "in the world that we are living in those things are more important than doing things well*"*. It is more important, he argued, "to be connected to the social networks where opportunities arise". Silverio made his videos well, but his mistake was assuming that the work ends there. The point of Osvaldo with this example is that it is not enough to be the most brilliant mind or the most brilliant expert in certain things, especially in design, because "design", he argues, "is all about social skills" - it is those skills that he considers important for the school that was being in discussion. This situation shows that "the deployment of a single set of skills through the course of a working life" (Sennett 1998: 22) is no longer suitable. Social skills are understood as the capacity for interaction, for dealing with unpredictable circumstances – it is in that sense that they are understood as 'practical'. This notion of 'practice' is therefore an embodied, interactive one in the sense that it is meant to be responsive to an environment (Ingold 2000): it is open-ended. In this regard, seen from a para-ethnographic point of view (Holmes & Marcus 2008), it resembles the theoretical toolkit that social scientists use to describe the world they analyse (Schatzki 2001; Bloor 2001; Knorr Cetina 2001). Flexible skills are based on the idea of blurring the modern division between theory and practice – that is why Osvaldo refers to the Anglo-Saxon model of school as one where 'thinking' is separated from 'doing', which seems to point to tacit knowledge or embodied skills. Tacit knowledge involves the mobilization of forethought and

intuition, the harnessing of non-cognitive resources (Thrift 2008: 35) and the idea that knowing, as a form of practice, is inseparable from doing (Ingold 2000: 316; Schatzki et al 2001). However, 'learning by doing' in this context does not refer to a form of 'embodied practice' as in the anthropological sense but rather to a way of reverting the modern hierarchy that usually puts theory over practice. In the designers' 'flexible skills' and 'learning-by-doing' version of practice, practice is positioned *over* theory, something that is closer to project management than to embodied skills. 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 footware 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 thus 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. It is in this sense that flexible skills are also meant as flexible in a *social* sense: they are, in Osvaldo's conception, the same thing as 'social skills' and the reason why he arges that "networks" are more important than aquiring specialized knowledge.

Social skills and temporality

Practical competences also involve a different temporality as they are oriented to 'future-making' (Born 2007): I also understood that by 'practical competences' Osvaldo 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; and with the virtual, rather than the actual. Practical competences, thus, appear as the opposite of *doing something well* for its own sake – which is what Silverio does, which implies the end of a professional career based on technical knowledge and cumulative improvements: to Osvaldo, this kind of profile was "very well suited for the *previous world*" (referring to the world of Fordism, modeled on production, the world of organized capitalism), "but not for the world we are living in", making a clear-cut distinction between them as two distict economic cultures. Practical competences are also 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).

Thus, back to the model of school that was being discussed, according to Osvaldo, "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". The content of what one knows, in this regard, does not matter – or matters less than what we *may* do with it.

This example reveals how design work in the informational economy is being refashioned as a form 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, but not just as a way of surviving in it, but as a matter of extracting potential from it - which opens up something akin to a speculative pragmatism in recent academic discussions in social sciences (Wilkie et al 2017; Akama et al 2018), where knowledge production is understood as being based on the same premises: the lure of potentiality and using uncertainty to generate knowledge opportunities. These ethnographic details 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 context, neither something produced by it, but rather producing it, a condition which in turn opens an epistemic problem: when confronted with ethnographic subjects that already perform the theories and approaches to knowledge production that I would be using as tools to analyse them, I realise the impossibility of doing an ethnographich study *about* them. The epistemic uncertainty of this ethnographic relationship, however, opened me up the opportunity to perform another kind of ethnographic relationship, one that goes beyond the aim of interpretation and experiments with the uncertainties of speculative collaboration.

Performing a speculative-research sensibility and post-fordism at the same time

When exposing his vision of the design school and the teaching model he idealizes, Osvaldo articulates his vision of what the role of the 'new' designer adapted to a 'new' (economic) world should be, thereby refashioning of the designer as a flexible-skilled worker, which in turn unfolds a conception of personhood and

action that is more open-ended in comparison to the hubristic one associated to the western industrial modernity.

When thinking about the name of the school, to Claudio it "should be clear what is it that we are selling, in order to answer to what the market is expecting", but Osvaldo immediately replies that again, he is "thinking in a traditional way". "There isn't a method", Osvaldo said, referring to the idea that there is not a very formal design educational program that train people to have good ideas, "but if you expose people to a series of key figures there is a testimonial value". Osvaldo was suggesting the importance of stimulating a "system of relationships", referring to the idea of having a couple of designers, gurus, who would be invited to teach at the school or giving frequent talks. "Very pragmatically, this would be a way not only of transmitting knowledge", he stressed, "but also of *opening possibilities* of contacts and partnerships". His argument resonate 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. This notion permeates the discussion, for example when Claudio objects 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 performs some of the tenets of a neoliberal version of creative businesses: he already 'lives in a world' (that is, in a particularly imagined kind of future) where there is not any labor force nor industrial production involved in the design process, only ideas and consumers of those ideas. Osvaldo, in this sense, is *performing* 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 is enacting the idea that the main sources of profits are *ideas*, rather than material objects (Bauman 2000: 151). If *ideas* rather than objects are to be produced, then the argument that follows is that people cannot be trained in 'having good ideas' as there is not a linear method for producing them. There may be a rational method for creating material objects, to which the traditional step-by-step linear process of design corresponds – but there is not a codified or predictable one for generating ideas, which is the reason why Osvaldo's insists on hie notion of practical, flexible skills.

The mode of action that Osvaldo performs through this notion of practical skills also resonates with a neoliberal 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. The importance of exposing people to potential networks, future possibilities - rather than teaching traditional skills - product design, graphic design etc - 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, a different way of dealing with temporality unfolds, one which is concerned with the future, the virtual, and with becomings rather than beings, which in turn ressembles the theoretical approaches that we have available in social sciences to analyse this reality - for example Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) (2005), the Deleuzian notion of the virtual (2002) and speculative pragmatism (Wilkie et al 2017) among some of them. Regarding ANT in particular, these ethnographic examples may be seen as enactments of this descriptive philosophy of action, offering details on how this 'philosophy' that is based on the 'under-determination of action' (Oppenheim 2007: 477; Latour 2005) is actually 'used', embodied or practiced in the contingent entrepreneurship open-ended model of person as it is performed by the figure of Osvaldo. Actor-network is not here a tool for description of the world but rather something that has effects in the world: the design world that I am describing is a world being modeled on the idea of fluidity and networks, ideas that work here both as descriptors and local metaphors (Knox *et al* 2006) in the sense that they do not just describe the world, but are also embodied and performed by actors within the world described.

Latour takes the expansion of design as "a fascinating tale of a change in the ways we deal with objects and action more generally" (2008: 2), or an indication of what could be called a post Promethean theory of action (ibid: 3) where what it means to "make" something is being deeply modified. In the words of Latour, "What has gone is mastery – this odd idea of mastery that refused to include the mystery of unintended consequences" (ibid: 6). These ideas about action are actually deployed by designers themselves in the way they conceive their own profession, through their way of dealing with the new constraints and uncertainties posed by the economic crisis and the way they 'design' their own lives through it, to the extent that their contingent actions, 'assemblies', 'gatherings' and 'networks' become recursive of the "social reality" they supposedly describe.

Working with the not-yet

Reconfiguring the designer as someone able to extract potential from contingent ecounters and dealing with the not-yet resonates with the recent speculative pragmatism in social sciences. Speculation, in social sciences, 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, where the function of the speculative 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: the empirical is something in becoming. The interest in the speculative, either in design or social research, is refered to as an impetus to resist 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 is also concerned with a different *temporal* relation to the empirical: it involves the cultivation of an eventful sensibility (Michael 2012a; 2012b; 2015) or as Savransky *et al* put it, a pragmatics that deals with eventful temporalities (2017: 7) which reconfigure the empirical through a different temporality - the future. The speculative sensibility is understood as a device for opening up futures, rather than predicting them or closing them down; It 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. Speculative research is thus the design ethos of potentiality turned into social sciences' theory.

Turning chance into possibility: encounters between ethnography and design

An example of the speculative pragmatism in research as well as in designers' mode of relating to the not-yet 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 design' would be preferable to the existing one on 'exhibition design', and thus he invited me to be part of the process. The conversations 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 in him and arguments he could then use to negotiate with the design department. I realised he did not even want me to help him to prepare 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). 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 opooruntity is usually part of the ethnographic craft.

The email exchange proceded, detailed 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, always questioning his design-centered innovation model and engaging in paralel discussion, the arguments he used 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."

So suddenly his views are blurred with mine, and at times undistinguished: the designer who works *for* a community, he argues, corresponds to an orchestration of relationships that brings different possibilities and opportunities for the younger generation of designers. Continuing his argumentation with the school,

"what I'm interested in discussing with you 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).

The version of design as a collectively crafted practice collaborative with the communities that Osvaldo is here imagining resonates Alberto Corsín Jiménez' ethnographic account on open-source urbanism and open-source architecture (2014; Jiménez et al 2013) where the distinction between specialists and lay people or between producers vs consumers is blurred.

"I'm speaking about a world where the final aim is not established by the project leader designer, but it is established by the group of people to which the good/service/whatever is intended for. [For instance,] the final aim of what 'the School's bar should be is not established by an abstract board or the office of the Convention of *Bastogi* (an Italian company in the catering industry) but rather the people that use 'the School's' bar everyday. […] the idea on the basis of a biennium of this kind is that the design skills underlying the delegation of the consumer group would be significantly diverse from the design skills underlying the delegation of the administrator of a company (or of a public institution)". (ibid.)

Osvaldo's argument is 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, which is a different version of (labor) uncertainty that was described at the beggining of this text: in Osvaldo's version, uncertainty is turned into a source of opportunity.

A characteristic of new capitalism 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" (Thrift 2008: 31). Thus, as we can see from design, other 'virtues' are more valued, such as relational capacity, 'soft skills' (Thrift 2005; 2008; Sennett 1998), as well as leadership in 'teamwork' promoting 'collaboration'. However, the point is not simply that speculative modes of action, either in design or in social research, cannot be seen in isolation from the economic system and culture that produces it; the point is that theory is creative of the reality it describes and it becomes impossible to separate description from the 'reality' that description creates (Law & Urry 2004; Law & Ruppert 2013). Osvaldo reads Sennett - by the time he was very excited reading "the craftsman"; a computer science of the studio seemed to be more familiar with Latour than myself. What Osvaldo does is a mode of ethnographic

recursivity (Holbraad 2013): he not only grasps the anthropologist point of view, he appropriates it and performs it for his practical puropuses. The challenge this recursivity poses to anthropology is not just that of exploring how ethnography can act to transform anthropology's own activity (Holbraad 2012: xviii) but rather how to do anthropology when "the native's point of view" merges with the anthropologist's point of view about what she is attempting to describe. Immersed in the difficulties of doing an ethnography *of* a design culture, as if a mere object of study, what this situation opened me up to is the possibility for turning a classic ethnographic relationship between anthropology and design as an opportunity for researching together and mimic Osvaldo's recursivity, in other words, the possibility that ethnographers could use design practices as empirical resources for generating knowledge (a mode of knowledge production that Gatt and Ingold 2013 name as ethnography-by-means-of-design), and the possibility that designers, in turn, could generate creativity not just from ethnographers, but from the contingent encounters that etnography affords (that would be design-by-means of-ethnography).

Conclusion: non representational social-sciences; non representational capitalism

This article discussed some of the ways in which designers perform an open-ended conception of personhood, which is an example of the performativity of the crisis of a model of work. The aim of such analysis is to understand how do people in design and in the informational economy do not just simply embody/reproduce but perform/bring into being new models of neoliberal work, where the conception of personhood and model of action that is presumed for working in a time of 'new capitalism' is shifting towards an open-ended one (Thrift 2005: 48). I have described how designers *perform* the crisis of a model of work (the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist work) - they do not just illustrate it - *they bring it into being* in very specific ways. In the examples discussed, Osvaldo defends the notion of 'flexible skills' (he calls it 'practical competences') as opposed to specialized knowledge, thus performing the notion of post-Fordist 'immaterial worker' (Lazzarato 1996) and the new capitalism 'ethos of potency'. In performing this kind of 'future' that we supposedly already live in, he is not just representing it, he is bringing it into being. Stefano's performativity of 'practical skills' in design may thus be regarded as the celebration of the new capitalist's ideal character traits of flexibility, disorder and fragmentation, or the encouragement of spontaneity – the kind of traits of character which appear among people truly at home in the new capitalism. It is the end of an idea of progress, or, as Bauman describes, progress has been individualized, deregulated and privatized (2000: 135). To some extent, it is this notion of individualized progress that Osvaldo performs: the idea that progress does not

depend on the 'outside' anymore – society, organized capitalism, professions, careers, welfare state – but rather on personal 'inside' potential. Autonomy and self-entrepreneurship are central to the myth of a mode of action which is more based on improvisation, something which blurs the line between theory and practice. Anthropological theories of practice, including actor-network theory (Latour 2005; Oppenheim 2007), which rely on a relational and open ended view of subjecthood and action, are to some extent undistinguished from such empirical 'native' philosophies of action. Thus, neoliberal work emerges from this ethnography as a *virtual* kind of work (Massumi 1987; Deleuze 2002; Massumi 2002), performative of itself, where entrepreneurial narratives and practices of innovation are sometimes undistinguished from the theoretical and analytical concepts of social sciences, such as 'cognitive capitalism' and 'post-Fordism' (general approaches, universalizing, social theory), or open ended philosophies of action, such ANT – these narratives and practices do not just illustrate them, they perform them in a way where not only 'theory' and 'practice' are undistnguished, but also social science and the 'world' are undistinguishable – and where (neoliberal) discourse (on the 'new economy') *becomes* (neoliberal) ontology. In this complex neoliberal process, which is performative of itself, theory does not just simply describe the world anymore: theory is, literally, *performative* of that world. By the same token, social sciences are not *out* of this neoliberal process, they are actively producing it. If indeed social sciences' methods are performative, and if methods enact the social (Law & Urry 2004; Law 2006; Law et al 2011), then, this opens the question of how to produce knowledge in non-representational times? Can this example of recursivity between epistemology and ontology inspire other kind of (more interventive, and akin to design) social science? Could experimental collaborations between ethnography help to bring *another* world into being out of this vicious-circle self-performativity that just reinforces the world as it is?

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