

This text

FILE UNDER

Graphic Design, Design
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WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

Francisco Laranjo

Ian Lynam

Randy Nakamura

Brave New Alps

Luiza Prado

& Pedro Oliveira

Cameron Tonkinwise

James Langdon

Kenneth FitzGerald

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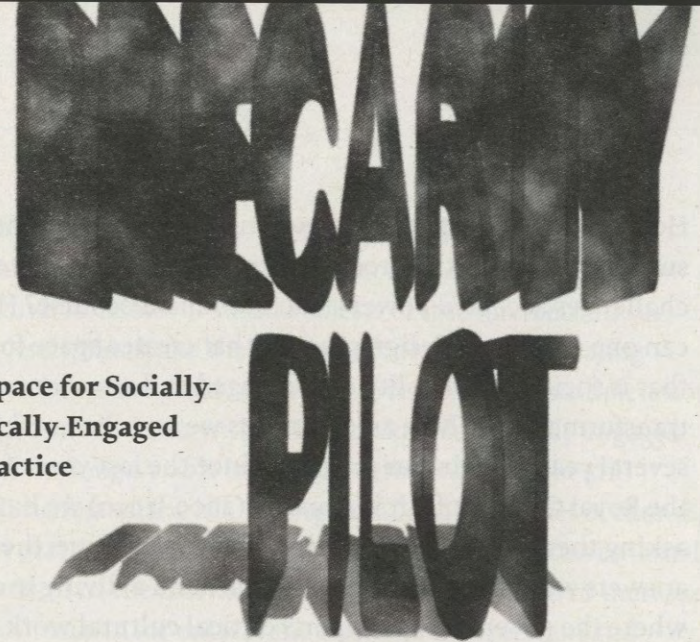
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MODES OF CRITICISM 1

because it's



**Making Space for Socially-  
and Politically-Engaged  
Design Practice**



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Brave New Alps



How can one walk the line between some sort of financial sustainability and the production of design work that critically challenges accepted power structures and discourse? How can one organise a design practice that creates space for work that is socially- and politically-engaged and aims for social transformation? These are questions we have been asking for several years within our practice. Since the last year of our MA at the Royal College of Art in London (2009–2010) we have been asking them in a more structured way. At the time, the only answers we could get were centred around a) living in a country where the government supports critical cultural work, namely through state funding; b) setting up a successful commercial practice and taking 10% of your time to do pro-bono or other kinds of socially-engaged work; c) getting into teaching to monetarily stabilise and feed your practice; d) being able to count on the wealth of your family.

The limitations of these options left us unsatisfied and frustrated. In fact, we observed how the conditions to which these answers were the response to had contributed to the dropping out or de-politicisation of the work of many of our peers, who, during our BA studies in Italy (2002–2006), had produced incredibly engaged work but who had “disappeared” just a few years later. This dynamic bothered us because it raised questions of the viability of our own practice and the transformative potential we see in design. We came to the conclusion that if design work was to be supportive of naturocultural justice, i.e. a justice that does not only consider humans but also nonhumans (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014), there was a need to put in place strategies that would allow socially- and politically-engaged designers from diverse geographical and social backgrounds to develop viable practices.

There seems to be an open assumption within design

education that designers should engage with pressing social and environmental issues. In fact, the number of courses that have social, environmental or similar objects of study in their title or course descriptions, and the number of thesis projects dealing with such issues are proof of this. However, design education is not trying to come to terms with how to make this critically engaged approach to design viable in the long-term. In face of the still unravelling financial crisis, the organisational strategies of running a design practice are still, more than ever, tied to the conventional mechanisms of the market. Students are encouraged to increase their enthusiasm for entrepreneurialism, competition and mainstream notions of success. This individualising approach is largely ignoring the accelerated politics of precarisation in Europe. These include, for example, the cut of hard-fought welfare provisions such as free or affordable health care and education, the undermining of labour-rights, the rising cost of housing but also the cuts of cultural funding—all of which are radically changing the socio-economic conditions for people living in Europe.

Advice to designers on how to make a living still tend to be “one size fits all” suggestions, with little to no differentiation regarding people’s approach to the world, their socio-economic background, gender or geographic location. Thus effectively ignoring that in our times of socio-economic and environmental crises, there is a need and the possibility to experiment with other ways of organising our work and our lives. And while design activism, adversarial design or design as politics are encouraged and enthusiastically taken up by students, the prevalent discourse on how to make a living as designers is not yet substantially questioned by design education and people’s desires for other ways of practicing are most of the time cast aside as naïve, marginalising or simply unviable.



Wanting to intervene in this situation, between 2011 and 2013, we received a rhd fellowship from the Design Department at Goldsmiths, University of London, to thoroughly work through our questions both in practice and in theory. This fellowship provided us with the time to inquire how the creative industries function, how their economic, social, psychological and physical procedures affect the lives of designers, and how these procedures fit into the functioning of capitalist economies (Elzenbaumer, 2014). What became clear was that although designers and design education do not openly speak about it, within the creative industries most people are exposed to exhausting precarious working and living conditions, such as bulimic work patterns, long hours, poor pay, anxiety, psychological and physical stress, and lack of social protection (c.f. Elzenbaumer & Giuliani, 2014; Lorey, 2006;). Given this situation, we became interested in how design education—both inside and outside academia—can move from the production of docile creative subjects to the production of designers aware of labour politics so that they are prepared to create conditions that are less precarious. Which in turn would allow for more engaged and transformative work to be produced while also allowing for more inclusivity in regards to who can work as designer.

This research gave us the opportunity to work through possibilities of intervention by drawing on feminist and autonomist Marxist theories of the political economy, which focus on the potential of workers to bring about social change through the production of common(s) and a radical restructuring of (reproductive) labour. Inspired by the engagement with such approaches, since 2014—thanks to fellowships from Akademie Schloss Solitude and Leeds College of Art—we are gathering the research of the last years in what for now we describe as a “subversive career service”: *Precarity Pilot (PP)*, developed together

with illustrator and pedagogue Caterina Giuliani, is an experiment on how to co-create relays between theoretical knowledge about precarious work and practical strategies to secure livelihood in de-precarising ways. Unfolding through a series of Europe-wide nomadic workshops and an online platform, the project is dedicated to familiarise us and other designers with possibilities of performing enabling rather than precarising economies and interdependencies. We focus on the collective exploration of how design skills can be mobilised in order to spark a socio-economic “becoming-other”, i.e. a transformation of how we perceive ourselves and how we relate to the world, or, more precisely, a “becoming-other-with”. Because, as the philosopher Donna Haraway points out, there is no isolated becoming-other (2011). The workshops should contribute to the creation of economies—within and beyond design—that foster naturocultural justice and equality. Through *PP*, we invite designers to experiment with tackling the tensions between the production of engaged content and precariousness by embarking in the co-creation of economies (and ecologies) of support that allow long-term viability of design practices that aim for social transformation.

We see the current notion of success within the field of design—focused on individual visibility and market value—closely entangled with the precarising rat race typical of capitalist economies. It contributes to the rarefication of more radical social engagement, and as this engagement often hinders one’s ability, but also willingness, to participate in the aforementioned race. In this individualising climate, we see the need to introduce ways of working and living that follow an “ethics of care” (Tronto, 1993) towards others and that are thus grounded in a more thorough understanding of the politics engendered by one’s individual and collective ways of practicing design. Shifting from an ethics of competition to one of care is a strategy to challenge



the precarising yet widely accepted notion that one's survival needs to be based on constant competition. One in which the best chances for success are stood by entrepreneurial, self-assured, smart, independent, popular designers. We propose that making space for cooperative, reflexive, complex, entangled and critical designers also means to make space for relations that go beyond competition and that allow for the construction of mutually empowering interdependencies, solidarity and collective action.

Making space for other selves through a diversity of relational modalities is for us an opening towards linking content with politicised ways of working and organising. But although it is clear that all design work is political, whether it is overtly taking position or implicitly siding with what is taken as the norm (and thus falsely assumed to be apolitical), we strongly argue that the choice of inscribing one's design practice in transformative politics cannot solely be reduced to a matter of individual choice as it is often suggested. A key example of this de-politicised tone and argument of individual responsibility is used in *How To Be a Graphic Designer Without Losing Your Soul* (2005), by design writer Adrian Shaughnessy. But when designers comply with and perpetuate the normalised yet precarising procedures of the creative industries and the neoliberal agenda—such as systemically relying on un- or underpaid work of others, overworking and/or overspending as common practice, pitching without question, eagerly offering hyper-flexibility—they put pressure on others to do the same. This compliance with precarising procedures erodes the bases for resistance while also privileging the healthy, (apparently) independent and well-off designers. By structuring social relations and ways of practicing in mutually empowering rather than precarising ways, the conditions for making a living through design work can become more inclusive, allowing for a diversification of

the field. Moreover, the effect of this re-structuring is connected with the transformation of socio-economic cultures at large. As designers change their ways of working and relating to each other, design work also starts to change: it becomes possible to engage with the world from a position that knows that competition, individualisation, marketization and (self-)precarisation are not an unquestionable norm. It becomes possible to collectively redesign economies and interdependencies in ways that defy, resist and/or exit precarising ways of organising and designing.

*Precarity Pilot* has been exploring this in a number of different ways, ranging from small, individual interventions to substantial collective experiments. These vary depending not only on the location, but also the specific professional and personal situation of the participants. Propositions explored so far through *PP* encompass, amongst others, the creation of spaces to openly speak about the relation between design and money: how much to do you charge for your work, how is the money you earn distributed within your collective or company, and when is it acceptable to work for free? Other questions address the way designers relate to time: what happens if designers stop being constantly ready to work, stop working and sending e-mails on weekends, plan projects in a way that getting ill is not causing a major professional, psychological and physical melt-down? What happens if networked design collectives commit to work only part-time, while adopting a low-consumption lifestyle and contributing to transformative structures outside the field of design? These are only some proposals that have been put forward by *PP*. They are, however, representative of its approach: an attempt to make conventional, precarising ways of practicing, strange. By doing so, *PP* recalls that designers can work and organise themselves in different ways, and that these can be functional under current, difficult conditions while also being prefigurative of a different future.



We're aware that the proposals for intervention put forward through *PP* are not necessarily to be accomplished easily, without doubts, failures and contradictions. University-educated designers are already a privileged group in the global rat race and the present research project has so far relied on competitive fellowships and research positions. But this does not diminish the urgency of needing to find de-precarising strategies of working and organising as they are the long-term enablers of socially- and politically-engaged practice. In this setting, it is encouraging that this research does not stand as an isolated endeavour but is embedded in a larger ecology of people around the world experimenting with economies that work towards the prospect of better lives for everyone, despite multiple and increasing crises. Here we are thinking of experiments that are developing in many places in diverse and situated ways, such as community economies where relations and exchanges are negotiated ethically, practices of commoning where common goods are (re) produced collectively, subsistence perspectives where people produce mainly for the direct satisfaction of their communities' needs, economies of degrowth that defy the capitalist imperative of expansion and solidarity economies that build empowering links between economic alternatives. With *Precarity Pilot* we invite designers to collectively engage with this central entanglement in which design exists and to experiment with multiple approaches to restructuring ways of working and relating. There is a great need to create and share knowledge towards the development of inventive tactics and strategies to make socially- and politically-engaged design practices viable in the long-term.

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www.precaritypilot.net

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