

Neither Scylla nor Charybdis: some muses on forming one's practice and resisting bad arguments

By Valeria Graziano

In our current world we are increasingly encouraged to live interconnected lives. At work as in life, we participate in networks, we are asked to collaborate, we contribute to group conversations in social media.

Some commentators have called ours the network society or also the society of engagement. Aside from the specialist lingo however, what are the implications of this change? Many institutions that ordered the life of the modern industrial world (the factory, the office, the trade union, the party, the family, the state, the church, etc.) were rather stable communities, marked by perceivable hierarchies too. Contemporary relations, at work and at play, appear much more fluid and unstable. Not only are co-workers, acquaintances, lovers, cities and houses changing at a more rapid pace, but each of these relationships is also more ambivalent in its own right. A friend could become our manager in the next project, or we might find ourselves recommending someone else for a job. One of the most common ways in which this ever-changing work and life conditions are talked about in relation to the design field is 'freelance'. While this term admittedly sounds much better than 'precarious' (literally, one who prays or begs for obtaining a favour from the rich) and it contains the appealing prefix 'free', its actual meaning can be useful to spot yet another contradiction in urgent need of our collective reflection: freelance in fact describes a soldier for hire, literally going to war, putting him/herself, him/her body, him/her wellbeing, in danger, for whomever is able to offer a sufficient remuneration.

The context in which the following text is situated is one characterized by a dominant European - and possibly global - trend: that of the externalization of the entrepreneurial risks onto the workers. Instead of being hired, people are contracted as if they were independent enterprises in their own right, as if it were possible, for a person, to simply close shop and move somewhere else, open a line of credit or go bankrupt, reinvent his line of production to match the caprices of the market. And yet this increasing precarisation of life and of working relations represents a tragically twisted response to a demand that was central to international social movements of the 1960s and 1970s: a refusal of the monotony of fixed employment, of the boredom of the same tasks and the same colleagues everyday, for a life time. While the workers and the students of the 1970s asked for more flexibility, they imagined it supported by a form of public social welfare that would encourage a more satisfactory work and life for everyone, with dedicated benefits for temporary unemployment, career breaks, for taking time off work to study, and part-time employment options for those who wanted a different work/life balance.

Instead, the neoliberal regime has turned these demands into a weapon against workers. It delocalized production to countries where workers are more vulnerable; public social welfare has been turned into workfare (a punitive version of social welfare that blames the individual for the structural unemployment that affects our societies) or privatized in the form of private insurances. Social protections have been cut for all kinds of contracts (no maternity, no sick leave, no unemployment benefits) and the financial sector of the economy has been allowed to grow wildly and without accountability (the majority of economic transactions today are financial in nature, and actually do not require workers at all). In a nutshell, this is the brief summary of the recent history that brings us to where we stand today, describing the evolution of the material conditions that shape the working lives of many freelancers, self-employed and precarious workers of the so-called creative industries in a specific way, but increasingly of all sectors of employment. The double origin of these conditions - the workers' demands on the one hand and the neo-liberal capitalist response on the other - both contributed to shape a number of key ideas that are commonly used to organize our individual and collective practices. In what follows I want to examine a few of these, to bring into focus the different ways in which these ideas can empower us and contribute to our wellbeing, or alienate and make us more dependent on the very relations of production that oppress us.

Worker or Creative?

While in training, designers are not often encouraged to think of themselves as workers. Instead, the majority of courses treat their students as creatives, as artists, or as highly skilled professionals. In so doing, teachers pass along a series of often tacit expectations about the working life and career that awaits their students after the course: ideas about being 'discovered' or otherwise acknowledged as talents, about staying passionate about their practice and staying up to date about the latest developments in the sector. All of these ideas are an important part of learning how to imagine ourselves as leading a joyful life and having a dignified relationship with one's work, which can be a fulfilling activity, meaningful for our sense of who we are, intellectually stimulating, but also useful to others and able to offer a positive contribution to society at large. While the perception of our self as artistic types is an important process to shape our desires, to imagine ourselves only as creatives or/and professionals can also mean that we are called to ignore some of the more troublesome conditions that are also part of practicing design as workers. To imagine oneself as a worker might be fearful, but it is as important as to keep having passions and demands. To perceive oneself as a worker means to acknowledge that when we work we are always implicated in hierarchies and conflicts over power. As freelance workers we might be the more vulnerable party in such dynamics, or other times we might find ourselves having to manage others in turn. To think of ourselves as workers also means to acknowledge that our work is not only a way of expressing our talents and stimulating our minds, but it is also a obligatory activity in our society that we must perform in order to satisfy the primary needs of security, shelter, nutrition, care, etc. This is especially true in the so called creative industries, where the majority of tasks in place is actually not creative at all, but, like in any other job, it is geared towards the necessities of making money and to compete (manage, report, archive, promote, etc.). To recognize ourselves as workers also means to acknowledge that the obligation to work is a common problem that connects us with many others who are also not part of the few (the famous 1% of humanity denounced by the Occupy Wall Street movement for instance) who can live off their accumulated capital or properties as rentiers. This in turns means to also think about the division of labour that creates terribly numbing jobs for some people on the one hand (the so-called McJobs, with no hopes of progression or challenge) and more existentially rewarding professions on the other, including those in the field of design. To reflect on how we can position ourselves in solidarity with other workers as they formulate their own sets of desires and demands might also strengthen the capacity of improving the conditions of our own practices.

All the time in the world

During the course of the last century, time used to be a hot topic of conflict between office and factory workers and their employers: the first wanted to work fewer hours for more money, and their bosses wanted the opposite. This battle was not only about the overall amount of hours worked, but also about the expected rhythm of production while at work, or the speed at which the worker could perform her allocated tasks, that which in managerial lingo is called 'productivity rate'. During the 1970s especially, many intellectuals begun to foresee a society of leisure: because of the technological advancements (including computers) that increased the productivity rates of many sectors, they thought that within a few years people would begin to work less and less and so that the main problem would become how to spend their free time without getting bored. In some countries, like France, this proposal also inspired concrete demands for a reduced working week, which was established at 35 hours in 2000. Despite a few rare exceptions like France however, we are today in fact working in average much harder and for longer hours than ever. Historians even tell us that we even work more than the peasant societies of pre-modern times. While the reasons for this situation are complex and many, and the struggle over time is far from over, we are at a moment in history when we must collectively rethink how to make time a political problem again. One of the difficulties today is that remuneration for freelance and precarious workers is not tied to time through a fixed measure. Work tends to be compensated by results, performance or finished product, rather than by a realistic hourly rate. All the time put in preparation, research, finding inspiration, trying and failing, experimenting, etc. is typically not accounted for. And yet we know that the quality of the work often crucially depends upon all these activities that rather than being preliminary are actually constitutive ingredients of creative, cognitive and affective labour. While in the creative and cultural sector we often do not have a fixed time of work, we do not want to defend the 9-to-5 routine schedule that, as Dolly Parton said in a famous song, 'ain't no way to make a living'. Today, this fluid time risks to be the opposite of a victorious conquest of more free time, and it might become a nightmare experience of temporality in which we can never truly stop working, stop worrying, stop being productive, stop being on the lookout for the next opportunity or client. The infinite time of the internet and social media too affects the way in which we experience the passing of life: the next email could always be an offer to work, which we cannot refuse as

we must be constantly connected and available at all times. We must keep ourselves available for change and novelty all the time. So, the question remains open on how to politicize our relationship to the temporal dimension of life so as to liberate it as much as possible from the things that we have to do, to preserve energies and resources for other kinds of experiences that could also make us discover different economies and relations. The question also remains on how can we embrace the limits that make us human - getting tired, needing a break, not wanting to move - other than as liabilities. Which brings us to the second way in which the perception of time might be an excellent starting point for a common reflection around our practices. Design is a big component of what has been called the contemporary economy of experience, which is based on the production of endless series of special events, festivals, spectacles, upgrades, showcases, inaugurations, pop-ups, etc., one after another, in order to produce value. We are asked to work in a succession of self-contained projects that culminate with a product launch. The logic of the event might seem the sign of an exciting and dynamic culture at first; however, it is linked to an idea of time that might be fast-paced, yes, but linear and cumulative. Instead of thinking our practices as simply productive of one-off events that put in a list make up a CV, we could speculate on how they are simultaneously and sometimes almost transgressive and yet somehow also productive of processes that do not end when the official engagements do. To think around the ways in which we make time of these other rhythms might be a point of entry for discussing the quality of relationships we sustain both in our productive networks and our networks of support.

Self-management and self-organization

Self-management is today a popular model of organizing work; for a number of years now it has been on the rise in popularity in management literature, and it is favored both within major corporations and in the world of small firms or working collectives. At a first glance, self-management is often perceived as being preferable to being managed by others. In self-managed working environments relationships tend to be less hierarchical and more informal in tone. Nobody checks on you or imposes a set of prescribed protocols on how you spend your time or organize your activities; as long as your results are satisfactory, you are pretty much free to go about your tasks as you please. Moreover, in self-managed working teams or groups the division of tasks is collectively negotiated among the members, which contributes to a more democratic culture of decision-making.

Yet I would like to draw attention to the fact that self-management can also be a disciplining mechanism that might result at times even more controlling and harder to oppose than the most terrible of bosses. When the responsibility of success is put on the worker's shoulders, it is easy to become our own worst enemies. Some times, to self-manage ourselves means to be asked to come up with on-the-spot solutions to bigger problems that the client or contractor is not willing to address himself. Even worse, when working with others we might be tempted to manage them in turn to squeeze more out of friends or acquaintances in informal relations with us. At other times, self-management becomes a sort of self-discipline and self-exploitation in which we are constantly encouraged to change our personality or police our behavior to match what is required of us. In other words, if self-management means to simply move the locus of control from the boss's office to our own head, it can solve very little of our problems at work, and it might indeed intensify them. Moreover, stress and anxiety provoked by self-imposed working regimes might affect our health and wellbeing in deeper ways, as our boss literally lives with(in) us and might never stop nagging or reminding us of that upcoming deadline. In summary, in self-management situations, the self risks to become the site of the battle and the resistance that used to happen at the work place - but how do you organize a strike of the self?

To differentiate this insidious self-management from its potential for liberation and democratization, it might be useful to speak of self-organization instead. Self-organization describes those processes that not only redistribute the decision-making procedures, but also reflect upon the kinds of decisions that are being made, the reasons why they are, and their implications for a more just and free society. Historical examples in this sense abound: from the history of the international cooperative movement, which includes many design and printing co-ops, to the worker's initiatives during the Spanish Civil War or in former Yugoslavia, to the more recent workers-run factories in Argentina and Greece. These precedents might not have always been successful in the long run, and their histories will need to be reactivated in new and unforeseen ways in the present; however, they represent a rich variety of approaches on how to practice collectively and organize production in sustainable yet equitable ways. Unfortunately, they are seldom introduced as viable 'business models' to design students, and even many frustrated professionals ignore how it would be possible - and beneficial - to organize otherwise. Thus, to revisit some of these histories collectively might

offer more concrete inspirations on how to self-organize our practices around principles of care and resilience, rather than self-manage each other through a tough economic situation that is pushing everyone to be a bit more cynical and opportunistic.

The next brilliant move

Perhaps some of the readers of this text will be a bit disappointed at this point because of the lack of clear directions and recommendations I have covered here. This was not about sidestepping responsibilities, nor am I trying to withdraw the information I might have on how to best organize a practice vis-à-vis money, time, power, etc. The truth is that I am still working through many of these paradoxes, tensions and contradictions too, as are most people who are brought up in cultures that do not teach how to share much. This is also the reason why I've been using the 'us' through this text, as I feel that I share with the intended interlocutors of this website a disquiet that I do not want to sweep under the carpet. Indeed, I believe that no one has one size fits all formulae to answer on these matters, not even the brilliant and inspiring thinkers cited in the bibliography for further study. By which I do not mean to suggest that tested methods, skills and practical ideas should not be circulated more in our networks. If we know endless theoretical critique to be ineffective, it is also true that opportunities for thinking together critically about our conditions, and to do so rigorously, beyond the exchange of opinions or laments, are becoming rare both in education and beyond. By presenting here some of the points of inconsistency in the dominant discourse around labour in the creative industries, I hoped to encourage a feeling of legitimacy for all those who, even with limited experience of political theory, will want to keep thinking and discussing the urgent matters, to keep insisting that to look for better ways is both necessary and desirable and to fight all those that want to convince us otherwise is both imprudent and beautiful.

About the author

I've been practicing as a theorist, educator and cultural organizer. With the collective Micropolitics Research Group (2007-2011), I contributed to a number of militant research initiatives on the formation of subjectivities and circulation of value in London's creative sector. In recent years, I co-curated Summer Drafts. Laboratories of Transversal Vivacity (2008-2012), an experimental programme exploring pedagogies of antiracism in the border region of Bolzano (IT). With colleagues at Queen Mary University (UK), I've been facilitating the practice exchange series Self.Organizing (2011) and School for Study (2013). Among the things that that I hold dear there are ambiances of militant conviviality, adventures, carrots and all things tacky.

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