



## Designers' inquiry: Mapping the socio-economic conditions of designers in Italy

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### Introduction

How are other designers working and living in Italy? What do our peers think about their working conditions? In what ways does the profession they chose to practice affect their lives? To what extent are other designers already organising themselves around their rights as workers? These were some of the questions our collective – the Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative (Construction site for non-affirmative practice) – have discussed since our formation during a collectivised residency set up by the design collective Brave New Alps in autumn 2011 at the project space Careof DOVCA in Milan. The residency invited eight recent graduates from Italian design schools who had worked on social, environmental or political issues through their theses, to share a politicised co-working space over a period of two months. The desire behind establishing such a space was to experiment with what might happen when socially and politically engaged designers were brought together in a space committed to an analysis of how the work and working conditions of designers fit into the capitalist mode of production. Given this commitment over a period of eight weeks, besides engaging intensely with each other's work, we followed a series of eight seminars led by the Italian economist Hervé Baron on the social imaginary in capitalism<sup>1</sup>, we met with collectives like San Precario, the Carrotworker' Collective and Serpica Naro to learn about their approaches to dealing with precarious working

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1 Baron, who had been suggested to Brave New Alps by Andrea Fumagalli, describes himself as an economist with a passion for philosophy. In fact, he combines a post-Keynesian approach to institutional economics with the philosophy of Cornelius Castoriadis.

conditions, we organised a series of discussions about the future of small and medium-sized production in Italy (Cantiere, 2011), and, finally, we immersed ourselves in a process of collective writing through which we discussed and formulated our desires, needs, anxieties, doubts, points of orientation and inspiration in relation to producing socially and politically engaged design work whilst having to deal with precarious working conditions (Unità di Crisi, 2013: 346-351). Out of this intense engagement grew the desire to continue to research and work together as a collective beyond that time in Milan. Thus, since we feel deeply involved not only in the making of signs and objects, but also in the creation of relations, processes, languages and collective imaginaries, we decided to launch our collective work by making public our issues and questions around precariousness.

## The process

Driven by a desire to involve a larger group of people in our discussions, we presented our collective and its concerns in an Italian university in December 2011. However, the middle-aged professors dismissed our concerns regarding precarious working conditions and how they influence the choices designers make in relation to the projects they produce, identifying them as an individual rather than a systemic issue, as a personal inability to deal with the market. Rather than accepting such a dismissive position, we wanted to produce more concrete knowledge about our own and our peers' socio-economic conditions. Hence, in February 2012, we began to engage in a process of self-education of how other people, in the past and in the present, have produced knowledge about their own condition in order to then activate that knowledge to challenge and transform that very condition. While engaging in this process of self-education – beginning from a text by Marta Malo de Molina (2004) – and discovering inspiring examples of self-consciousness raising groups, co-research collectives, and participatory action research groups, we realised that, as a collective, we were already beginning to inscribe ourselves in such a tradition. We subsequently came across Marx's *Workers' inquiry* (1880) and were fascinated by how many of his one hundred questions, then formulated to engage French factory workers in an investigation of their working lives, could still now be accurately applied to investigate our condition as cognitive workers. Marx's questionnaire-led inquiry appealed to us as a strategy that would allow us to reach a large amount of designers while still effectively guiding them through a critical questioning of their working practices. Therefore, we decided to base our inquiry on a carefully crafted questionnaire that could trigger reflections on areas of work and life more commonly overlooked by designers. We began by formulating questions that would invite designers to reflect on eight areas: their education and family

background (e.g. *What is your housing condition? What is your father's/mother's profession?*), their working conditions (e.g. *How many hours are you working on average in a week? How do you determine the monetary value of your work?*), the way they encountered internships (e.g. *In the case of an unpaid or underpaid internship, how did you sustain your living costs? Did you ever take on interns?*), their satisfaction (e.g. *Are you satisfied with your work in relation to its aim and the modalities of executing work?*), their working environment and health (e.g. *Do you have physical/psychological problems related to your work? If you have children, how does this influence your working life?*), their thoughts on the figure of the designer in society (e.g. *Do you have any thoughts on the ways designers relate to society?*) and, finally, the way they organise themselves around their rights as workers (*Are you part of an organisation that protects the rights of designers? Do you know of any cases of workers' strikes within the field of design?*). In the course of elaborating the questionnaire through lengthy discussions around the pros and cons of every question, we chose to explicitly position ourselves on the side of precarious designers, given that such a viewpoint is ordinarily lacking in the reports and discourses that are circulated with regards to this sector of the creative industries (Design Council UK, 2010; Berufsverband der Deutschen Kommunikationsdesigner, 2011). This is not to say that there are no critical sociological accounts, but that unfortunately these accounts seldom reach the designers themselves (cf. Gill, 2005; Manske and Ludwig, 2010). Therefore, by producing an inquiry ourselves among our peers, our aim was not only to create knowledge but also to provoke much-needed reflection and critical discussion around the conditions of our profession, which might then lead to co-operations, common struggles and real transformations.

By April 2012, we had finally developed 78 questions and launched our *Designers' inquiry* during the Milan Design Fair as an anonymous online questionnaire. Choosing the context of the design fair to circulate the inquiry was important to us, as the fair constitutes the moment during which you can find the highest concentration of designers in one place around Europe. In this sense, we imagined choosing the fair as being analogous to waiting at the factory gates in Fordist times. Once the inquiry was in circulation, we saw the participation of 767 designers working in Italy within two months<sup>2</sup>.

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2 It should be noted that we define 'designers' within a broad range of overlapping competences related to the field of design, ranging from graphic, web and product design to animation, fashion, illustration, architecture and design research, since, through our own, our peers' and our university tutors' working lives, we are aware that many designers now constantly move between multiple fields of competence in order to make it to the end of the month.

After closing the online inquiry in June 2012, we began to take a series of collective steps to explicate the answers to the questionnaire. These included the organisation of two workshops that opened up the task of rendering the data to people who are not usually involved with the Cantiere. The first of these workshops took place at Careof DOCVA from June 27 to July 1, 2012, and was centred on an initial screening of the data, followed by a brainstorming of ways in which to make strategic use of the data. The second open workshop took place half a year later, from January 25 to 27, 2013, and was centred on the representation and communication of the elaborated results. Here, our focus was on finding a way to communicate the findings that would give space both for the statistics that had emerged and for the personal stories and voices behind them. For us, it was important to open up the interpretation of the data to people beyond the restricted circle of the collective, so whilst these workshops were not necessarily always the most efficient in terms of getting the work done, they were immensely important in involving more people in the production of knowledge and in bringing yet unconsidered angles into the discussion. After the final open workshop, we spent another two months producing a conclusive report which attempts to balance the statistics and the personal voices in such a way that (we hope) it might foster a wide range of discussions and actions amongst designers, design educators and policy makers. We launched the report in April 2013 (Cantiere, 2013), again at the Milan Design Fair, through a series of small actions, strategic mail-outs, radio interviews and a five-pages contribution to the special design edition of the national newspaper *La Stampa* (9 April 2013).

## Outcome

The majority of the designers who responded to the inquiry were between the ages of 21 and 35 (with peak participation from 26 to 30 year olds). They were mainly of Italian nationality and had completed a university degree. At the time of participation, the majority of respondents declared themselves to be working full-time and to not have children. Overall, the eight sections of the inquiry outlined a professional figure that is complex and not easily summed up without leaving out important nuances. However, we can say that 'to do design' emerges as an activity that requires a huge dedication of time and resources, independent of the level of success a designer is experiencing. To work as a designer means to be exposed to precarious working conditions which, for designers in Italy, manifest themselves in, amongst others, unstable working contracts and freelance work, an unsatisfying relation of working hours and pay, a tendency to work in isolation and the necessity to be supported by a family network because the income is not enough to live autonomously. Moreover, it requires enormous flexibility, which translates into a discriminating factor (and a reason to drop out

of the profession) for mothers and those in circumstances that do not allow for this flexibility. There also emerges an almost complete unawareness of designers' own rights as workers and an almost total absence of organisations that would help strategically enforce, protect and extend these rights. However, the inquiry also portrays designers as enormously attached to their work and, although they often dislike their working conditions, as passionately attached to it – to the extent that they would not change their choice of profession.

The various sections of the inquiry brought to the fore many details that are worth outlining. With regards to *family background*, the typical designer depicted by the inquiry comes from a middle class family unconnected to the so-called creative industries, and very rarely has a migrant background. From the parental professional profiles, one can deduce that, in order to progress in their profession, only few designers can count on strategic relationships or on tools (such as workshops or studio spaces) deriving from their background. However, the housing situation of designers in Italy remains particularly tied to the conditions of their family of origin or of their partner: in fact, 39% live in homes owned by their parents or partners.

In relation to their *working conditions*, the majority of respondents manage to work in their individual field of expertise, although 58% do so as freelancers without a contract. For more than a third, it is necessary to supplement their income by carrying out other jobs. Among these secondary jobs and occasional services, designers work in a variety of design and non-design related sectors. Moreover, a third of the designers declared that they rely on the help of their family circle and friends in order to make it to the end of the month, specifying that this support has been, or still is, essential so as not to abandon this profession. A further third is made up of designers who barely square the balance sheet: who have debts, a bank loan or who have used personal savings to cover their living costs. Thus on the whole, only 16% of designers are able to describe an autonomous, 'well-off' economic situation, managing to put aside savings.

Nevertheless, when it comes to *satisfaction*, the main motivating factors towards work for the designers in the inquiry appear to be interest and enthusiasm: 61% would not change their study curriculum, even though they consider their education only partially useful in regards to professional goals, and despite the precarious working conditions encountered in the market. In relation to *working environment and health*, the inquiry reveals that 55% of designers work from a study or an office. However, a third of the participants take work home to do at night or over the weekend. The working environment appears to greatly influence quality of life and to work from home is considered

by many to be claustrophobic and non-stimulating. Nevertheless, the use of co-working spaces is not prevalent amongst designers in Italy. When it comes to assessing their health, well over half the participants complain of work-related physical problems, mainly connected with computer use and a sedentary lifestyle (backache, visual disturbances). Among psychological problems, stress, anxiety, depression and sleeping disorders prevail. Moreover, 22% of participants say they feel discriminated against at work, mainly in relation to gender, geographic provenance, personality and lack of strategic social relations. Gender-related discrimination does not affect male participants, while it affects a third of females.

In answers to questions around the perception of the *figure of the designer*, there emerges a sense that designers feel that their role is not sufficiently acknowledged within the context they live and operate in. This is further outlined by some of the adjectives used when asked to describe someone else's view of their profession, like "fun" and "indefinable." In answers to open-ended questions focussing on the relation between designers and society, a considerable number of designers interrogate themselves about the opportunities offered by design as a critical instrument; self-reflection amongst designers on their profession and their role appears to be commonplace.

Finally, when it comes to considering the political *organisation* of designers, competition is revealed to be a noticeable factor, with struggles around work evidently suffering from it: only 7% of the respondents declared themselves to be part of an organisation that protects the rights of designers. Moreover, almost no designer participating in the inquiry knew about cases of strike (2.4%) or sabotage (3.7%) within the profession.

## Reflections and next steps

A strong sense of resignation emerged in the personal statements collected by the inquiry – a feeling that the possibility to access work and fair working conditions will not change, or if not worsen. Moreover, the main strategy to deal with this situation appears to be to plan to emigrate in order to find work in less stifling socio-economic environments. Despite this rather bleak prospect depicted by the inquiry, we found that the collective evaluation of its different sections took away our perception of precariousness as an overwhelming, monolithic thing one cannot fight. Instead, it allowed us to see it as a process of precarisation constituted by a variety of procedures that act at different levels, such as disorientation around the monetary value of design work, difficulties in conceptualising design as work, unawareness of one's rights, discrimination

according to gender, age and ability, ambitions driven by the dominant discourse of competition and entrepreneurialism within design and fragmentation between designers. Although this stratification renders precariousness complex, it is also what provides the Cantiere with a sense that aspects of it can be countered, exited and/or undone from many different angles: by strategically strengthening design-workers in relation to clients and employers (for instance, by fostering a fluency in regards to standard fees and hourly wages, the negotiation of project estimates and contracts, collective organising), but also by intervening in how designers project themselves, their activities and their social relations into the future.

Having said this, we are aware that we are a collective that researches and produces together on minimal resources, while the results of the inquiry call for interventions in many different areas. Initially, this mismatch of resources and the need for action seemed overwhelming until we realised that we could effectively create alliances with other groups who similarly struggle against precarisation – some of which we have connected with throughout the process of the inquiry, such as ReRePre (Rete dei Redattori Precari - network of precarious editors) and ACTA (Associazione Consulenti Terziario Avanzato). Furthermore, we realised that in order for us to progress, it was important to find aspects within the inquiry that we could tackle with methods that would energise us. Ultimately, we decided to focus on what is most important to us, namely not to de-precarise designers as they are – because we are aware that much of what designers do is oiling the mechanisms of a mode of production that depletes not only designers but also other humans and non-humans – but to create both careful and strategic interventions against precarisation that also move towards politicising and transforming the activities of designers.

We have since begun to work on the elaboration of workshops and tools for designers and design students that address two areas:

- a) engaging designers in considering design as work – who gains from the work designers produce? How much do people in other professions earn? What are their rights as workers? What is considered work and what is not? To what extent does working as a designer mean spending time standing up for one's rights and how might one do that? How does one master the creation and negotiation of estimates, of contracts that work in the design-workers' favour?
- b) re-imagining what it means to work as a designer – what is a 'career'? What is success and failure and who measures them? What potential do relationships of solidarity hold vs. relations of competition? What

measures can empower female designers to stay in the profession? What unconventional paths can be developed in working as a designer?

The first area is where we see the possibility to connect with design schools, whereby it closely relates to their responsibility in preparing students not only to aspire to become creative geniuses and/or savvy entrepreneurs, but to actually acknowledge that the labour market for designers is particularly saturated, that in order for graduates to make a living there is a need to create solidarity between designers, to develop a strong sense of the value of their work and of tactics to claim it strategically as well as collectively. The second area focuses on deprecating designers by inviting them to question the whole narrative of what it means to *be* a designer. Given that the inquiry showed the openness of designers to critically question themselves<sup>3</sup>, we consider that by engaging more designers in reflecting on how design-activities contribute to (re)create imaginaries that are often tied to stifling notions of a career, consumption, self-perception, gender- and social relations more generally, we can develop ways in which to employ our skills in order to create languages, imaginaries and relations that open up possibilities for transforming these notions, towards generating very different futures.

Whilst this post-inquiry journey has only just begun, we intend it to move us towards both improving the socio-economic awareness and conditions of designers and enabling more designers to make space for content and processes. In this way, designers might be able to engage with the world in meaningful and politicised ways.

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3 This emerged especially in the section regarding the satisfaction with their work.



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## the authors

The Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative is a group of Italian designers who have been working together since 2011. They engage in studying and experimenting with support structures for critically engaged design practices. They believe that it is necessary to radically rethink the work of designers in relation to society and that there is no sense in reproducing the usual languages, products and methodologies whilst waiting for the next period of abundance, but rather that now is the time to create new ways of living and working together. The workshops being developed in response to the inquiry are made available at <http://www.precaritypilot.net/>.  
 Email: [pratischenonaffermative@gmail.com](mailto:pratischenonaffermative@gmail.com)