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Towards a polylocal polylogue on designs and *autonomías* – an intro

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The organization of this special issue of the *Strategic Design Research Journal* took us along many paths. As you will know by now, we started this process interested in questioning mainstream design and in exploring designing across and above disciplinary frontiers. At the beginning, it was just a conversation between the three of us (Alfredo, Andrea and Chiara). A conversation consisting of our thoughts emerged at (and by) the crossing of cultures, continents, trajectories and aspirations. Sure enough, even if we are located in/living in/from Colombia, Finland, Italy and Brazil, our minds-hearts-legs are actually in multiple locations. However, suddenly, things changed. The conversation expanded. From October 2016 to June 2018, several different people around the world joined our journey and an intense exchange of ideas took place beyond the papers we received and the related selection process. It has grown in proportions through and with email exchange, face-to-face conversations, and skype calls.

These events raised an issue that we had discussed and struggled with, as editors, since the beginning: the limits of mainstream academic modes for writing, for communicating ideas and valuing them. If several voices were trying to discuss with us beyond (and thus stressing) those limits, how could we help them and others to participate in the rich exchange we were witnessing around the topic of the call? We could not stand not “changing the ways we change” (Escobar, 2016, p. 140). So, we looked into how we could destabilize, explore and expand the possibilities of an academic journal.

Therefore, we contacted design scholars who we consider relevant and rebel voices in rethinking design and who are interested in issues beyond the modern, capitalistic and western civilizational pattern. We invited them

to write “pieces of a conversation” that could be made up statements about the call for papers (to agree as well as to disagree with aspects of it), or of reflections the call itself raised in more experiential terms than in academic way. Some of them accepted, some declined, some did not answer our invitation. Ten people agreed to participate in this initiative through seven separate pieces. By coincidence and without a direct relation, both the journal and the Polylogue each have seven pieces.

The first of them is written by Arturo Escobar of the University of North Carolina. His reflections on design are about the reorientation of design(s) as world-making practice(s) in deeply relational ways, informed by Latin American thought. Moreover, both his work and his latest book, *Autonomy and Design*, inspired our call for papers.

The second is a contribution by Ann Light, University of Sussex. She is a provocateur and qualitative design researcher, interested in how people relate to each other in contemporary society and in the influence of present/future design choices.

The third contribution was written by six hands: by Barbara Szaniecki, Rio de Janeiro State University, a researcher focusing on design and politics, especially on the role of design in the relations between institutions and social movements. She wrote together with two of her students, Mariana Costard and Liana Ventura, whose research activities concern the role of design in the public space and participatory design approaches.

The fourth piece was written by Ezio Manzini, design researcher, writer and professor, as well as one of the founders of the DESIS network (Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability Network). Moreover, he is one of Escobar’s main references for design discourse.

The fifth contribution comes from Rosan Chow, who works at Muthesius University of Fine Arts and Design and researches on design theory and methodology. She investigates the fundamentals of design and methods and tools that could advance design practice and education.

The sixth piece is co-authored by Tina Engels-Schwarzpaul and Albert Refiti. Tina's works focus on cross-cultural research in art, architecture, design, and performance in Aotearoa, the Pacific, and Europe. Albert is a researcher in the field of Pacific spatial and architectural environment, especially on the indigenous spatial and environmental knowledge and on how it relates to people and communities' identity in the Asia Pacific region.

The seventh and closing contribution is authored by Tony Fry, design theorist and philosopher who works at the crossroads between design, unsustainability, and politics through Studio at the Edge of the World, an organization dedicated to the development of transformative projects that he founded.

With this mixture of interests and locations, we proposed (and propose to you) and designed a *polylogue* that explores creative ways of understanding, of contributing to each other's ideas and of writing.

After receiving the first versions of the 7 contributions, we share them online amongst all the contributors. Everybody had the possibility to take a look at each other pieces, and react as well as contribute to them (i.e. by commenting a passage, highlighting something, asking a question, etc.). Then, each author had the possibility to go back to their original contribution, evolving it through the thoughts the conversation provoked. What we are sharing with you are the last versions of the pieces, intertwined with fragments of the conversation that took place. You may understand the polylogue as an open-designed and never-ending design activity among several people that progresses on a theoretical and empirical level through these people's research activities and design projects. The "Poly" in Polylogue is a combining form that means "much, many" and comes from the Greek root *poly-form* representing *polýs*. It can be forged into a number of compound words alluding to multiplicity and diversity, some of which we think apply here. It is a case of a "communicative *polygamy*" that allows us to establish fruitful communicative relationships (marriages of ideas) between discourses and ways of designing, which may have offspring in practices and applications of design otherwise. Throughout the polylogue activity period, the pieces worked as a platform for on-going encounters among a *polyphony* of positions and dispositions towards the idea of design and of *autonomía*. They also represent and constitute this *polyphony*. Actually, those of us who participated are located in different countries and speak in "international English" seasoned with different idiomatic flavours and sounds (Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Samoan and German).

In drafting the polylogue activity, we identify three references for our appropriation of the polylogue idea, which are its genealogies. The first one comes from the French linguist Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004) who recalls the deep-seated tendency to assume communicative interaction as something that happens between two people, assuming it as a prototype of all interaction forms. She affirms that dialogue has been positioned in many contemporary areas as a *par excellence* scenario of communication. However, in a dialogue, the communication process takes place between two and just two participants¹. The idea of a polylogue, as understood by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004), accounts for communicative interactions among multiple participants.

The second genealogy can be found in the work of the Taiwanese philosopher Hsueh-i Chen, who points out that a polylogue² for intercultural communication serves to overcome Eurocentrism in philosophical thought. For Chen (2010), many (*poly*) words, voices, discourses or reasons (*logos*) intersect in two ways: the first one, from which we try to escape here, is a sort of chatty cacophony in which everyone talks (writes) at the same time and nobody listens (reads). The second one is more optimistic (and ideal) and considers the polylogue as a medium to find that many different ways of thinking (and for us, also of feeling, sensing and designing) can be reconciled and articulated reasonably (and we would add emotionally too). Chen (2010, p. 62) writes that "identifying ourselves culturally not only entails remembering what we have already been", it also implies that we must reinvent (redesign?) ourselves. Then, paraphrasing Chen, designing ourselves and designing "our" design anew does not require us to rely exclusively on pre-existing cultural backgrounds and identities. Perhaps, it is possible to redesign ourselves with the help of designs (or of its equivalents) from people of every culture that we meet or work with.

The foregoing leads us to the third –and closest– genealogy inspired by the work of designer Fernando Álvarez Romero (2014). For Álvarez Romero (2014), a polylogue³ operates in two directions: the first, amongst different cultures (through an intercultural approach akin to those already presented); and second articulating the knowledge that is produced –science, empiricism, applied wisdoms, as well as technologies and techniques of different origins– to transform not a reality, but realities; not a world, but worlds. In this view, those engaged in a polylogue cannot assume that "philosophy", "modernity" or "design" are defined within the parameters of just a certain culture –in this case the Western one– since expressions of other cultures that will not satisfy this *a priori* definition could then be easily (de-)qualified as "magic thoughts", or "ethno-philosophy", etc. This was a premise of our collective work in the polylogue – our writing, reading, commenting, exchanging.

Therefore, the whole special edition and the polylogue for us, work through an intercultural approach, as well as a kind of intercultural design (Gutiérrez Borrero, 2014) that

¹ In order to avoid ambiguity, she prefers to speak of "dialogue" (instead of dialogue) when referring to exchanges between two people, as the Greek prefix "dia-" means not "two", but "through" Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004, fn. 1).

² He borrows it from the contemporary Austrian philosopher Franz Martin Wimmer.

³ He was inspired by the work of Josef Estermann who compares, as peers, the philosophical traditions of the West and of the Andean peoples. See Estermann (2006, 2008).

spans across levels of knowledge and reality (from the understanding of our worlds, to producing knowledge, to exploring how to act and to acting within them). Actually, beyond the creative exercise between authors, guests and editors, we hoped that these ideas and conversations could be translated into action by us or others. We hope that they will allow readers, practitioners and critics to follow us and to jump into existing or future (or catalysed by themselves) speeches and turn them into actions to transform words through applied discourse and concrete design practices, which should be the expression of multifarious strategies to enable autonomous design process.

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Erratum: Authors' information included on page 136.