



The drawing works in this way: starting from the base upwards, autonomia(s) may act through different mediums and ways, producing and configuring aspects of "expanded designs". These can act as disruptive forces over modern design. The drawing can also be read from the top to the bottom too: starting from the fragmented contemporary world, new design practices foster ways of doing design that through change pursue autonomias (design by Liana Ventura and Mariana Costard).

## Designing, sensing, thinking through *autonomía*(s)<sup>1</sup>

With this special edition of the *Strategic Design Research Journal* (SDRJ) we want to contribute to the emerging debate on design's role in the creation of the very worlds within which we live, the conditions for plural possibilities of being, and in critically self reflecting on the conditions, infrastructures, networks and scaffolds that world-making in our troubled times require. It should not come as a surprise that calls for a reorientation of the design disciplines, away from the functionalist, rationalist, and industrial traditions dominant for most of their history are surfacing today. The past decades have seen multiple calls from both mainstream and critical positions.

One of the most successful and mainstream moves for rebranding design expertise and goals can be located in propositions for the conduct of user-human centred design (see e.g., Norman, 1988) and even more in the popularity of design thinking as a multipurpose innovation method (see Irani, 2018; Kimbell, 2011, for critiques). These moves have led to ever-encompassing claims that design expertise and processes are able to achieve innovation that can lead to forms of social change, while contributing to productivity and competitiveness (see e.g., Brown, 2009, for an example of such claims).

Other subtler critical stances, but perhaps bringing more long-term changes, are instead trying to elaborate on more socially conscious, political, situated, and relational practices. Without pretending to be exhaustive, we consider that the following examples highlight some of the current voices engaged in the broader program of reorientation of design(s) as world-making practice(s). To start with, we want to note: the long standing interest of participatory design in elevating the political dimension of design processes (see e.g., Greenbaum and Kyng, 1991; Simonsen and Robertson, 2016); the interest in addressing issues of transitions towards more sustainable futures from a design point of view (see e.g., Irwin *et al.*, 2015; Irwin and Di-

Bella, 2018); the articulation of new forms of design spaces (Botero, 2013); design citizenship (see e.g., Papanek, 1973; Julier, 2011), design in everyday life (Manzini, 2015), as well as in the public sphere (Ledesma, 2010); the articulation of design practice towards expressions of dissent (Fry, 2010), agonism (DiSalvo, 2012), social justice (Dombrowsky *et al.*, 2016; Mitrašinović, 2015), complexity (Franzato *et al.*, 2015; Del Gaudio, forthcoming) and interculturally dialogue-enabling design processes (Engels-Schwarzpaul and Refiti, 2012), while engaging with new forms of researching (Chow and Jonas, 2009) observing, moving, and imagining local environments and territories (De los Reyes and Botero, 2012; Del Gaudio *et al.*, 2016; Szaniecki *et al.*, 2017); interweaving social relationships anew (Light and Akama, 2014); and forging new alliances between design and other practices like anthropology (e.g., Anastassakis, 2013; Gunn *et al.*, 2013) or science and technology studies (e.g., Lindström and Ståhl, 2015; Farias and Sanchez Criado, 2018).

When putting together the call for papers, we wanted to build upon aspects of these contributions; while at the same time fostering reflection on whether design –and other modernist practices– can actually contribute to weaving the assemblages of human-non humans that seems to be necessary in order to value plural ways of being. This type of contribution seems to be quite a challenge for design, even within the above-mentioned trends. We found that, in addressing similar questions, the anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2012, 2015, 2016a) suggests that experiences formulating processes of *autonomía*<sup>2</sup> emerging from mobilized grassroots communities in Latin America – amongst others – could act as interesting signposts for such a task.

In his recent contributions (2015, 2016b, 2017, 2018), Escobar builds explicit bridges between various critical theories, autonomy, and political struggles, on the one hand, and design discourse, on the other. He builds those bridges mostly from unfamiliar places to the dominant design gazes of the global north, while poking and making holes that can hopefully be filled with new ways of looking at and imagining design at large. In the Spanish and En-

<sup>1</sup> By agglutinating here, the words designing-thinking-sensing, we want to signal the polysemy of our thoughts, actions, intentions, feelings and sense-making. It is also a nod to sociologist Orlando Fals Borda who developed the notion of *sentipensar* in Spanish (translated as feeling-thinking) to account for the art of living and thinking with the heart and the mind together. This is also a nod that Arturo Escobar –from where the notion of *autonomía* is taken– has used in previous texts, without the word design (Escobar, 2016a).

<sup>2</sup> English speakers might tend to relate the concept of *autonomía* with a more individualistic understanding of the term, that is perhaps more common in the English uses of the word *autonomy* (e.g., as in autonomous vehicles). However, Escobar –and other contemporary thinkers– mobilize a communal notion of *autonomía* that stems from radical notions of relationality and autopoiesis (see Escobar, 2018, and the conversation pieces from the polylogue of this special edition).

glish versions of his last book, he sketches a few principles for how he sees forms of *design practice otherwise*. From his analysis, forms that acknowledge and work with-in an *autonomía* framework, could be key contributors to a reimagining of our collective futures. In his work, Escobar weaves examples of collectives fostering and developing concrete ways of what he explains in terms of “changing tradition traditionally”, thus fostering the idea of “changing the ways we change” (2016b, p. 140), which he summarizes under the concept of *autonomía*. The proposal that *autonomía* (in the sense used by Escobar) should be a preoccupation for design, and therefore that design should also be a preoccupation for *autonomía* (Tinta Limón, 2017) has intrigued us from the outset.

For Escobar, and the rich tradition of Latin American thought from which he draws, *autonomía* can be understood as a “cultural, ecological and political process that involves autonomous forms of existence and decision making” (Escobar, 2016b, p. 141; Escobar, 2018). From the perspective of design and designing, this means supporting conditions for various actors, including designers, to participate actively in the already ongoing processes of change so that “every community [can] practice the design of itself” with dignity (Escobar, 2016b, p. 16). Upon reading his work, we see an understanding of *autonomía* that challenges (and calls into question) some (current) widespread design practices for community empowerment, where unspecified interests in doing good –through collaboration or by fostering a re-socialization of design– are not sufficient, or better, let’s say, are not sufficiently grounded outside mainstream modernist design rationality. Tasks that require not only thinking about humans, but about multiple ways of life and more-than-human worlds (Forlano, 2017).

Therefore, as editors, designers and design scholars, we were wondering about the relation between *autonomía*, design practices and the political activation of relational and communal logics and ways of being, and how they could manifest –or not– in current design research and practice. We set out to map some of those relations, while questioning the relevance of the idea. The papers in this special issue are thus a sample of a new generation of design scholars who are carefully exploring possibilities of design(s) at the level of both design practice and design research.

## Process

The final selection is the product of a weaving process that included 23 original responses to our first call. This initial set of proposals came from a diverse range of settings both in the global north and south. They included contributions dealing with processes and thoughts from Aotearoa (New Zealand), Australia, Belgium, Botswana, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, China, Ecuador, Finland, Germany, India, Italy, Iran, Mexico, Turkey and the United Kingdom. We were fortunate to work with a cosmopolitan set of reviewers who accepted our invitation

with generosity. We tried to mix and assign the reviews so that the geo-political and epistemological commitments of both contributors and reviewers could be complementary. We tried –and not always accomplished– to ensure that the topics covered in the manuscripts as well as the concerns raised, could be addressed by someone familiar with the context, but also by others positioned differently to it. We were happy that reviews were mostly respectful and constructive of the possibilities and limitations that each contribution brought to the conversation. Exceptions notwithstanding, and we believe that all involved learned something in the process.

While we received a diverse set variety of submissions from both global north and south, unfortunately we were not able to have as many contributions from design scholars in the global south in the final collection as we would have liked. Why was this so? Language certainly was a barrier<sup>3</sup>, however there are also other knowledge production geo-politics issues at play that should not surprise anyone. As editors, we had a limited set of communication channels available and language resources at hand that limited from the outset the reach and scope of our invitation. We also proposed a timeline for this process and we made everyone stick to it. There were moments in the process where several papers dealing with important themes and settings were not quite ready, though they could have been if the timetable had been longer, or if our editorial dialogue and exchange would have been more thorough. This was not only in order to meet the standards of academic writing in English that the journal and the reviewers expected; but also, in terms of turning design work into the type of argumentative research that a paper format requires. In general, it seemed at times that the discursive modes of knowledge production are very taxing on designers (in the global north and south), who also found ontological design and *autonomía* either too discursive (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010) and abstract or hard to grasp –without taking them for granted or instrumentalizing them. While standing firmly behind the review process, and happy with the contributions brought together here; we believe there is the need to work on new modes of writing and thinking in line with *autonomía* thought. As a research and practice community, we need to increase the dialogue and possibilities of more voices to be heard and to talk to each other.

## Presenting the papers

The seven papers that make up the special edition present design experiences and socio-political initiatives with which the authors critically engaged in understanding what working through *autonomía* would mean for design practice, as well as how they could relate it to their own understanding of design. We see different attempts to re-frame *autonomía* within specific contexts of thinking, sensing and acting. The contributions bring together conceptual and theoretical analysis, as well as case studies and empirical findings for doing this work. The works se-

<sup>3</sup> We are aware that in an ideal world this would have needed to be a multilingual issue, however, due to resource constraints, only submissions in English were accepted. This poses many difficulties, for example: non-English speakers had certainly trouble working on their non-native language (as well as in translating-communicating concepts’ definitions grounded in local culture, language, or ways of reflecting into English or English ways of writing scientific papers) and non-Spanish speakers at the time of the deadline for the call, did not have access to Escobar’s more recent text, which was available only in Spanish.

lected can be understood as experimentations into which kind of design *praxis* (or better *praxes*) that the framework of *autonomía* fosters and discloses. In other words, we interpret these papers as crucial interventions in rethinking our design practice as they point out questions, doubts, limits, opportunities for dealing with the complexity and implications of multiple world-making processes within specific geographical, cultural, production and action contexts. There is also the effort of bridging and cross-fertilization of concerns.

In this regard, several of the papers reflected on ways to nourish design's potentiality towards a transition far from the hegemony of modernity's one-world ontology to a pluriverse of social-nature configurations. Christian Nold in *Practice-based ontological design for multiplying realities* brings to our attention the need for elaborating in more detailed terms ontological design –thus resonating with the critique of the abstract character of *autonomía*. Nold discusses Escobar's (and others') use of ontology as interesting for its political commitment, but sees it as relying too much on a metaphysical approach that may not be sufficiently grounded or pragmatic. According to the author, a Science and Technology Studies (STS) practice-based approach would give the concept of ontology a pragmatic potential for design practice. To contribute towards this appropriation, Nold suggests that ontological design should be enacted in daily life through socio-material means. STS and scientific controversies are the lenses through which he proposes a few alternative design principles. These principles sensitize designers to multiple realities and support them in identifying 'where' the ontological infrastructure of a problem is located, and where to act to set up (situated) controversies able to promote changes.

In a similar way, *Holding on to dissensus: Participatory interactions in security design*, by Claude Heath, Peter A. Hall and Lizzie Coles-Kemp explores how designers could be supported in translating elements of the framework of *autonomía* into practice. In doing this, they present creative methods built on participatory physical modelling and representations that could be used to engage with the ontological influences of design processes on the everyday life of a specific community. By reflecting on *autonomía* through a case of digital security design for home-banking services for low-income communities in the UK, they also show the possibility of extending Escobar's work in a context apparently different from the Latin American experiences that is at the basis of his version of *autonomía*. They appropriate "*autonomía*" for information security design, to see if this move can help them pluralise the futures of information security.

Tristan Schultz chose another way to overcome the dualist ontology associated with patriarchal capitalist modernity, and to feed the transition towards a discipline able to be part of plural possibilities of being. In *Mapping indigenous futures: Decolonising techno-colonising designs* he uses the concepts of modernity and coloniality to draw a path for supporting designers in promoting the ability to think plurally. Again, this author is able to go beyond Latin America too, by framing the discussion according to current phenomena and a specific geographical and cultural context, which, even if specific, allow us to understand the

potentiality of this discourse on a broader level. He frames it within the process, and technical capability, of colonising cognition brought forward by technology; and exemplifies it by reflecting on the Australian Aboriginal context he is engaged in. In other words, he frames *autonomía* within the current and future socio-technical framework. Thus, by critically reflecting on modernity and coloniality, he proposes five provocations that illustrate ways in which these concepts enable socio-communicative technologies to deskill groups from imagining –that is, how they colonise being-human. Based on this, the author presents how designers could encourage groups to think, talk and map out their situatedness within this phenomenon and mobilise decolonising options for their own worlds.

In *Autonomía and Cultural Co-Design. Exploring the Andean minga practice as a basis for enabling design processes*, Giulia Testori and Viviana d'Auria reflect on how the concepts of *autonomía* and *the communal*, largely developed from Latin American cultural experiences and political struggles, could be insightful and useful for the global north, including urban areas. Specifically, the authors explain that if *autonomía* could be seen as a lens to understand and act on reality, a cultural approach to co-design might reflect on the relationship between culture and space and the multiple actors involved in an urban project. They suggest that *Minga*, an Andean concept and cultural practice that refers to collective and communal forms of work, can create and inspire other autonomous forms of design (à la Escobar) and thus speculate on its potentialities.

Also bridging southern concepts to the global north and understanding how they can be adapted in different contexts, specifically in urban ones, Pablo Calderón Salazar, Mela Zuljevic and Liesbeth Huybrechts give insights into how *autonomía* and interventions in design practices can inform and complement each other. Starting from framing design as an interventionist practice, in *Southern manners in northern lands: Design interventions for autonomía*, they convey the idea that a southern perspective to design interventions is one way for practicing autonomous design. Specifically, through a reflection on "building" Non-Alignment, they point out a path for an appropriation of autonomous design: designers engage with a community by embedding themselves in its everyday life and sharing their concerns; moreover, any intervention of designers external to the community ought to be subjected to the same principles as those of the community.

If the two previous papers looked into the South to inspire design practices (whether Northern, urban, or virtual, etc.), in *Making and repairing places for making and repairing*, Philip Hector presents three cases of collective DIY initiatives in Finland and Germany to explore and understand the relationship between design and *autonomía* in these initiatives. In other words, he uses *autonomía* as a lens to find resources for *autonomía* itself within a context that has not generated it. The author understands DIY as a practice grounded and leading to struggles for *autonomía*, which he identifies for instance through care for the place, attention to the community and to the commons, among other things. His work emerges as an inquiry into how these initiatives create conditions for different ways of being and acting and about the potential

for *autonomía* in everyday life, thus promoting a systemic approach to *autonomía*.

Finally, Raquel Noronha in *The collaborative turn: Challenges and limits on the construction of a common plan and on autonomía in design*, goes beyond the exploration of the relationship between *autonomía* and design practice. On one hand, she reflects on the boundaries between “enabling designing”, “designing with” and “designing for” and how they should be rethought within *autonomía*; on the other hand, she points out that *autonomía* also requires from us a different way of researching design, as well as thinking and sensing through design practice and communicating it. In fact, Noronha weaves a dialogue with indigenous and maroon craftsmen and women, from the Maranhão Lowlands region of Brazil, to bring to our attention the interdependence of designing and researching within an *autonomía* framework. Moreover, the journey presented in the paper challenges the idea of *autonomía* as something that can be added to our current practice: in order to practise autonomous design, we have to rethink design’s main concepts. Drawing on postcolonial and subaltern studies, Noronha proposes that *autonomía* asks for a different epistemology that brings with itself, when working with local communities, the need of weaving in local dialogues and tensions. Cartography emerges as a project, research and living philosophy.

In addition to these seven research papers, this special issue has also a special section, or polylogue, reflecting on the call for papers that is made up of an introduction – *Towards a polylocal polylogue on designs and autonomías* – an intro by Andrea Botero, Chiara del Gaudio and Alfredo Gutiérrez Borrero, a visual map by Liana Ventura and Mariana Costard – cover of this special issue, and the following seven invited pieces:

- *Autonomous design and the emergent transnational critical design studies field* by Arturo Escobar;
- *Ideas of Autonomía: Buzzwords, borderlands and research through design* by Ann Light;
- *Design, development and the challenge of autonomy* by Barbara Szaniecki, Liana Ventura and Mariana Costard;
- *Autonomy, collaboration and light communities. Lessons learnt from social innovation* by Ezio Manzini;
- *Moving forward together* by Rosan Chow;
- *Autonomía, the vā, tino rangatiratanga and the design of space* by A.-Chr. (Tina) Engels-Schwarzpaul and Albert L. Refiti;
- *Design, a Philosophy of Liberation and ten considerations* by Tony Fry.

## Futures

From its beginning, the organization of this special issue has been a rich, insightful journey involving intense exchange between us –the editors, the editorial board, and design scholars (whether authors or not), as well as constant reflection on each other’s understandings of *autonomía*. The contributions in the special issue and its accompanying polylogue propose that working through *autonomía* requires designing, sensing and thinking, with some radical changes in design perspective –like mak-

ing the relational dimension of life, and working with and through communal and relational modes of knowing, being and doing a vital concern of design practices. There are no easy recipes for these ways of designing. Thus *autonomía*, as an issue-opportunity for design to address, joins and contributes to a series of conceptual moves working with “designs otherwise” that include: designs of the South (see e.g., Gutiérrez Borrero, 2015), respectful placements (Sheehan, 2011; Tunstall, 2016; Red-Wing, 2016), justice (Costanza-Chock, 2018) border thinking (Kalantidou and Fry, 2014) and decolonial design (Tlostanova, 2017; Schultz et al., 2018), amongst others.

Therefore, in wrapping up the special issue, we want to draw our collective attention to the fact that, in discussing the relationship between *autonomía* and design, it is not our (nor do we believe is it Escobar’s) intention to define the contours of yet another design method or approach; as this might run the risk of instrumentalizing it and therefore producing the very same issues it is meant to highlight. This is why we see this exploration rather as an opportunity to *think-sense-design through* a particular political commitment, one that should be of interest to designers and others engaged in plural ways of designing. What sort of things emerges (came up) when thinking-sensing-designing through *autonomía*? To start with, the collective reflections brought about by these seven papers and the companion polylogue (more on that later), help us to consider *autonomía* as an anchoring point. To make the argument from a corner that is more familiar to customary designers, we can say that questions of *autonomía* and design can be considered as a *placement* (as opposed to category) in the way used by Buchanan in his famous paper “Wicked Problems in Design Thinking” (1992). Quoting Buchanan:

*There are so many examples of conceptual repositioning in design that it is surprising no one has recognized the systematic pattern of invention that lies behind design thinking in the twentieth century. The pattern is found not in a set of categories but in a rich, diverse, and changing set of placements, such as those identified by signs, things, actions, and thoughts (Buchanan, 1992, p. 12).*

For Buchanan (1992), placements have boundaries that shape and constrain meaning but are not rigidly fixed and determinate as categories tend to be. Placements can provide orientation for thinking: when applied to a specific situation, they can generate a new perception of that situation, thus becoming “sources of new ideas and possibilities when applied to problems in concrete circumstances”, as Buchanan would say (1992, p. 13). This could also apply to communal and relational modes. Now, if Buchanan’s proposition is interesting, at times it sounds as a watered-down version of feminist standpoints (Harding, 1986). Therefore, beyond offering it as a placement, we want to consider *autonomía* as a prism for designers to look at their practices and understand *situated knowledges* (Haraway, 1988). Following what discussions of feminist politics of knowledge production have already shown us, at play in plural world-making projects there are always contradictions between embedded positions. In the words of Haraway:



*I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity (Haraway, 1988, p. 589).*

Thus, the collection of reflections gathered in this special edition should be seen within the spirit of a *wabi-sabi*<sup>4</sup> kind of combination, where *autonomía* and design are presented as always becoming. In other words, a humble attempt at gathering non-exemplary designs<sup>5</sup> and realizing an exercise on declassification<sup>6</sup> on what it is that could possibly intertwine design(s) and *autonomía*(s) together.

This special issue has been an opportunity to raise some of the struggles inherent to designing through *autonomía*. Several authors, as well as other researchers interested in the call, pointed out that there are several difficulties in actually grasping what *autonomía* is and how it differentiates itself from other existing and more known concepts (like the concept of autonomy within liberal and Marxist frameworks). How does one go about reorienting one's understanding of reality from a mechanistic one? How does one address the need to appropriate not only history and tradition of the specific geographical places Escobar exemplifies? How does one also actually embody other ways of being in the world? These should be taken into consideration for further dialogue about the framework of *autonomía*.

*Autonomía* implies a need to displace oneself that has to be clarified by any scholar wishing to delve into it; to get what *autonomía* can be, one has to be willing to perform these displacements and struggle through the arguments and questions posed above. It has also become apparent that we –designers– may need more help in understanding how to inform practice through theoretical concepts and continue searching for clearer ways to bridge theory and practice. This is an understandable need since this is emerging from a community strongly grounded on a pragmatic approach to reality and action. Designers and design scholars engaged with these discussions should think about ways to continue this search. However, since we understand *autonomía*(s) as paths to rethink our discipline(s) and profession(s), there is a need for them to be addressed also through design education. Therefore, *autonomía* necessarily asks for a design revolution: there is not a “how-to” design through *autonomía*, nor an easy way of working through the former paradigm's concepts and tools. Doing this would be making up, without actually changing how we design. We need to re-define constitutive concepts generated within the industrial tradition.

Naturally, there are many topics that could not be addressed within this issue: how reflections on *autonomía* could affect mainstream design businesses, or scenarios different from the ones approached by the selected papers. Therefore, we foresee several future possibilities of discussion and advancing in the debate on design's role in the creation of conditions for plural possibilities of being.

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**Andrea Botero**

andrea.botero@iki.fi

University of Oulu and Aalto University

**Chiara Del Gaudio**

chiaradg@unisinis.br

Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos

**Alfredo Gutiérrez Borrero**

alfredo.gutierrez@utadeo.edu.co

Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano and Universidad de Caldas

Guest editors

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<sup>4</sup> *Wabi-sabi* is a concept of Japanese philosophical aesthetics whose worldview is centred on acceptance of transition and imperfection and built on an appreciation of the ingenious integrity of natural objects and processes.

<sup>5</sup> Non-exemplary research strategy is discussed at large for example in the work of Marcelo C. Rosa and of the Laboratory of Non-Exemplary Sociology (LNES) at the Universidade de Brasília. They contend that research by “exemplars” has been traditionally mobilized to evoke narratives around the lack or deviance of political forms, economic and social development or morality in parts of the world. An alternative move is to talk about “non-examples” and discuss them in terms of their own forms, particularities and possibilities. Like exemplary sociology, exemplary design assumes to be the right way to design. Following LNES team ideas, a non-exemplary design cannot not be presented as “an example of”. It should rather be understood as a way to prefigure, to produce and to use artifacts that are significant but neglected, or unknown, within the hegemonic domain of the discipline. See: [www.naoexemplar.com](http://www.naoexemplar.com)

<sup>6</sup> In the sense used by Antonio García in *Declassification in knowledge organization: a post-epistemological essay* (2011): García argues for declassification practices that can introduce pluralism in the core logic of classification initiatives. While we never stop classifying, declassification involves the metacognitive assumption that different, plural and non-essentialist logics are also at play. We see that there are interesting links between the work of García and Escobar, which would be worth exploring further.

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Erratum: Authors' information included on page 56.