«Ci concimiamo a vicenda»: building support structures as part of design practice

Interview with
Bianca Elzenbaumer
by Meike Hardt

Designers and design researchers are increasingly facing insecure living and working conditions. Today's cultural and creative industries within the Western context consist not only of many large and small companies, but also of an array of projects that are characterized by short-lived, fast-changing activities. With the rise of neoliberal deregulation and flexibilization, secure working conditions have been deprioritized. Austerity measures and low-wage work are commonplace, as are cutbacks in the cultural and public service sectors. The related precarious working conditions are marked by a lack of security, demand for high flexibility, and competitive behavior. The mechanisms that cause precarity manifest themselves both in the organization of work (the way it is structured and practiced) and in working tools and working environments (the material form work takes). Such mechanisms represent a political-economic problem that has become institutionalized and socialized.

In order to practice design critically, it is essential to reflect on the methods and strategies of critical work. Furthermore, consideration should be given to the economic structures and conditions on which this critical design practice is based. Precarious economic structures have an effect on the abilities of design and its produced and established normalization mechanisms, as they often lead to inequality and repressive power relations. The Italian design researcher Bianca Elzenbaumer examined these research topics as part of the Precarity Pilot[1] online platform, the Brave New Alps collective in the Italian Alps,[2] and her PhD study «Designing Economic Cultures: Cultivating Socially and Politically Engaged Design Practices against Procedures of Precarisation» (Elzenbaumer 2013). From an activist, autonomous, feminist perspective, Elzenbaumer regards the design economy as a field that needs to be challenged and redesigned.

The interview was conducted by Meike Hardt, an *in(ter)dependent*[3] German designer and design researcher who engages with sustainable, equitable, and inclusive (design) economies and who researches about organizational forms and working tools that involve an expanded feminist understanding of (design) economies.

In this interview, Bianca Elzenbaumer provides insight into her engagement with precarious mechanisms in the design industry and design schools. She opens new vistas on an array of methods and

1 Precarity Pilot, https://precaritypilot.net.

2 Brave New Alps, https://www.brave-new-alps.com.

3 The term *interdependence* is referring to the multi-local alliance The *Interdependence*. Entrepreneurs and organizations associated with The Interdependence add the abbreviation idt. to their names. Following the approach of Community Economies, members of The Interdependence express a clear posture towards sustainable economies, solidarity and interdependency with others. Bianca Elzenbaumer actually proposed to use the description *in(ter)dependent* instead of *independent* designer. The Interdependence, https://www.community economies.org/interdependence.

tools that can provide a structural foundation for various critical and caring design practices.

MH I'd like to begin the interview with Carol Hanish's statement: «the personal is political» (Hanish 1969). This was not only an important source of motivation, but also the guiding principle behind the interviews you conducted for your PhD work: «Designing Economic Cultures: Cultivating Socially and Politically Engaged Design Practices against Procedures of Precarisation» (2013). In the late 1960s and during second-wave feminism, «the personal is political» and the essay so titled attracted a great deal of attention. As a political concept, it emphasizes the relevance of personal experiences and their link to broader political and social issues. With this statement in mind, I'd like to ask you about your own experiences in this area. How did your experiences lead you to your research topic, what motivated you, and what has changed over the years?

BE «The personal is political» is the foundation of my design practice and the practice of the Brave New Alps collective because we question our structures on a daily basis and view efforts to change them as political. Like many designers, at the start of our working lives we had difficulties surviving with our political and social design practice. My partner and colleague Fabio Franz and I didn't know if we could afford to practice design with a critical approach. As a result, during our master's studies at the Royal College of Art in London, which we financed with a scholarship, we attended professional development courses that we pinned a lot of hope on. However, we realized relatively quickly that what we learned in these courses didn't go with what we wanted to achieve. We wanted to work collectively, with collaborators who usually have only very small budgets. With the tools from the professional development courses, we faced limitations because the courses taught a «survival of the fittest» mentality and generally focused on an individualized practice that was based mainly on the designer's own interests. Based on this observation, we developed a research project with the help of a grant from Goldsmith College, University of London. We learned that precarity in the field of design was a structural problem and affects not only the designers who work critically, but also those who work commercially. The field is structured such that there is downward pressure on pay and upward pressure on working hours and it is difficult to get a permanent position. For example, statistics show that after the age of 40, designers in Germany either go into business for themselves or rarely work in the field of design (see BDG 2011).[4] Their ranks are filled

by the large number of young designers with «fresher» ideas who can work longer hours because they do less care work. They push the older designers out of the profession. When I see my personal precarity as part of my political engagement and restructure it through collective action, it becomes the «political» in my everyday life. This raises the following question for our design practice: how can we restructure the design economy?

We used my PhD project not only to carry out abstract research, but also to change the way we practice design. We learned that the economy shouldn't only be seen in monetary terms, that it consists of different resources that ensure our existence and survival. We learned to think about success differently, as success became relative to us. We began seeing ourselves not in relation to design practice, but in relation to the projects and people involved in social change. Our peers are not necessarily designers, but initiatives that create housing co-ops or run social centers, as well as the people who build anarchist schools or kindergartens in the forest.

With my work, I contribute to a larger movement that aims to reverse and change precarious working conditions. However, I have the privilege of no longer being in a constantly precarious situation myself. I had a scholarship to do my doctorate, and during this time Fabio started to remodel the attic of his parents' home in the Alps, which shielded us from high costs. We knew we couldn't live on a single salary in a large city and that neither of us wanted to work in a job where others told us what to do. Just after I completed my doctorate, we both got a six-month fellowship at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart (Germany), and ten months later, I received a position as research fellow at Leeds Arts University. In 2016, I took up a permanent position as associate professor there. So, I'm paid a monthly salary and the people I work with like and support my work. It's also worth noting that my research on precarity is done from the positionality of a person who has a European passport, who is white, and who speaks many European languages. Sure, I come from a social context in which I was the first person in my family to go to university – a context that simply does not quite fit in terms of milieu – but I didn't find it terribly difficult to adjust to other spaces. So, I have the feeling I'm no longer the best person to discuss what it means and what a burden it is to live in precarious conditions as a designer in Europe today. On the other hand, based on my experiences and convictions, I'm fighting for a solidarity-based, ecological coexistence, for working conditions and economies that empower people. The goal of my work is to ensure not only that Brave New

4 This observation was confirmed by various personal conversations with German designers that provided a foundation for Bianca Elzenbaumer's research work.

Alps survives as a critical and caring collective, but that we create conditions that make critical and caring practices possible on a large scale. Precarity takes various forms and is marked by various «levels of difficulty.» It's complex and separates people. Our concrete goal is to create solidarity in this differentiated landscape.

As part of Brave New Alps and my academic job, we have spaces in which we can think and work critically, in which we can attempt to make our privileges productive for others. How can the structures in which we're able to do critical work be helpful for others? How can we «hack» our resources, making them accessible to others? In Italian we say, «Ci concimiamo a vicenda» – «We fertilize each other.» In other words, how can we organize things, projects and people so that they support one another and care for one another? We're interested in such collective support structures. When we tap into and share resources, it creates cohesion and thus a space where people provide greater support for one another.

MH The political theorist Isabell Lorey refers to a process of institutionalized and socialized «self-precarization» (Lorey [2013] 2015). The term implies an interplay between subjugation and empowerment: people subordinate themselves to, appropriate, and replicate precarious mechanisms but at the same time have the potential to overcome and change these mechanisms. What «techniques of self-precarization» can be found in design work? How do they differ in the various areas of work – for example, in the work done by freelance designers, at university or in research?

BE Self-precarization always involves the precarization of others. It is an extremely widespread way of behaving that is sometimes something we learn – for example, when we constantly overwork and neglect our health, social networks, family, and other support structures. It starts during university studies: some design schools are open 24/7, which gives students the feeling that it's totally normal to work late into the night at a studio. This ethos of defining yourself by your work and only living for your work is part of self-precarization. It begins the moment you become involved with structures that create precarious conditions. This form of overwork produces a sphere of work that excludes everyone who cannot overwork, such as people with children or health restrictions or students who must finance their studies or internships through part-time jobs. Under these conditions it becomes more difficult for them to keep up with others. How we deal with time in the field of design is thus an important issue. For example, the conditions associated with «good» projects become evident at university. In most cases, these are the

projects that require a great deal of time. It makes a clear difference whether you invest 800 or 400 hours in a project. This creates the impression that people need to overwork to do a good job.

An industry is emerging in which a person gets fired if they can't or don't want to overwork. According to statistics, women make up 80 per cent of students in design programs. Ten years later, however, men dominate the field.[5] In design, we've developed a way of working in which it's totally normal for people who can't or don't want to overwork to fall by the wayside. Design programs need to convey a work ethic that permits people to look after their health, to have free time and a family, and to take care of their family. After all, it's not only monetary resources that allow us to lead a good life.

Another form of self-precarization is the appropriation of symbolic capital at an excessive price. This occurs in the cycle of «cruel optimism» that the theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) describes and that locks people into precarious situations by making them believe that they will soon manage to escape. It can involve accepting unpaid or underpaid work in the hope of getting more commissions or becoming more employable. As a result, precarious structures are replicated and reinforced. This type of behavior is understandable, because we see it in others, but it makes it more difficult for everyone to earn a living. In order to fight it, we need to ask how we can distribute resources equally. We can, for example, imagine economies as «messy» and ask who pays for what, who has enough, and who can give something away. What working conditions can I make possible for others in my privileged position as a professor – conditions that support others instead of creating precarity? There's a lot of scope here, but often it's not used because it means changing habits, which is time consuming.

People's ambitions in design are often homogeneous, which creates the impression that a designer who gets a great job or attracts a lot of attention wins while others lose. There's an impression that a win–win situation is impossible, that only one person can be in the spotlight. For critical and socially engaged design practices to change anything, we must give up the idea that only one critical practice can be successful. Instead, an entire movement must emerge in which we mutually support and care for one another. For this reason, it's important for us – as designers who work critically – to help transform the field of design such that it gives designers more opportunities to help one another, to network with other people or with designers who work socially and politically.

5 See Feminism and Graphic Design, https://www.feminismandgraphicdesign.blogspot.it/2012/03/bare-facts.html. In research, this phenomenon is known as the leaky pipeline (see Dubois-Shaik / Fusulier 2015).

It's extremely difficult to overcome individualised thinking because in our society we're conditioned to think only about our own success. It's important to turn this individualistic thinking on its head and examine the question of how it can be possible to work less competitively and more collaboratively and cooperatively. In this regard, it has been extremely helpful for us to view our practice not only as critical but as caring.

MH If we view design practice as caring, we move away from acting in our own interests – which, according to Adam Smith,[6] is the driving force behind the economy – and begin acting in the interests of the community. At the same time, we focus on a part of the economy that is currently marginalized in the mainstream view of economics. Can you describe the aspect of care in your work in greater detail? What constitutes a caring design practice, and what influenced your design practice in this respect?

BE Care is an important aspect of my research because it follows a non-capitalist logic. Bernice Fisher and Joan Tronto (1990) once said that care is everything we do and repeat on a daily basis in order to live well together. We take care of other people and relationships, we take care of the environment, we take care of things, we try to maintain and cultivate relations. These activities move away from the logic of consumption and competition because their goal is to maintain what we already have. The goal is not, for example, to continue expanding a network, but to preserve and strengthen an existing one.

The Spanish philosopher María Puig de la Bellacasa provides an excellent description of this concept in her book *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (2017). She writes that when we *care* for something, we need to become active ourselves. If we're *concerned* about something, we can keep a critical distance. For example, if I'm concerned about the climate, I don't necessarily need to take any action because I can adopt a detached critical position. But if I care about the climate, it implies that I need to become active. If I care about a person, I support that person and want the person to do well. If I'm only concerned, I can look on from the sidelines and leave it to the person to get on alone with her struggle.

6 Adam Smith had a great impact on the modern understanding of political economy, by coining that the core drive of the economy is to make decisions solely based on self-interest. This was published in his book The Wealth of Nations in 1776. Smith counts as a pioneer in modern political economy and is also known as the father of economics. The journalist Katrine Marçal uses this example as an argument on how economies are built of unilateral values. See also her talk «How Economics Forgot about Women» (Marçal 2015).

This brings us back to the concept of «the personal is political.» If I really care about something, I fight for it and take a risk. This implies that if designers want to work critically, they need to take a certain risk and take responsibility. With the concept of care, other values come into play that can provide orientation. They can be used to change the practice of design, in the sense of how you organize yourself, how you work, and how you relate to others.

MH What tools or methods are best suited to changing a person's working conditions and shifting such value-related practices? What methods can contribute to developing an awareness of mutual support and alternative modes of action to self-precarization?

BE An exciting concept here is that of diverse economies, which was developed in the 1990s by the feminist economic geographers J. K. Gibson-Graham.[7] They see the economy as an iceberg. This model helps us understand that the economy is diverse and multilayered. The part of the iceberg above water represents a small part of the economy. It stands for what is commonly understood to make up the economy, such as wage labor and capitalist firms. The lower part of the iceberg represents what ensures survival in the world. This is a much larger part of the iceberg and thus of the economy. It contains relational exchanges, such as neighborhood exchanges and work co-ops, where workers own their own businesses and can make all the decisions themselves. How do we structure our income, how do we share our work in our close network, and what about the barter and gift economy? From a global perspective, the lower part of the iceberg also contains unjust and cruel areas such as slavery and indentured labor, which continue to exist today. Based on the iceberg model and in cooperation with the Community Economies Collective,[8] J. K. Gibson-Graham coined the term «community economies» to describe the ethical relations and positive values in the lower part of the iceberg – not indentured labor, but neighborhood economies, for example.

At Brave New Alps, we aim to strengthen the lower part of the community economies iceberg. We don't want to restrict the economy to the upper part. The lower part of the iceberg can help us think about the structures and resources that make critical and caring work possible. What supports our lives and how can these structures be strengthened and cultivated? A helpful tool in this regard is resource mapping, where you write down on cards all the material and cultural goods at your disposal and then rearrange the cards.

7 J. K. Gibson-Graham is a pen name for Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson.

8 Community Economies Collective, https://www.communityeconomies.org.

This helps you discover resources you weren't aware of. Thanks to this mapping, design practice and all the things that support life are transformed into a configurable sphere, and a new economy can be pieced together. If you create an overview of your own situation and resources, it's easier to see how they can be made accessible to others who are in a different situation.

The iceberg diagram (Fig. 7.1) provided us with scope for new solutions, including projects in which budgets were more or less non-existent and we were wondering what could be substituted. My position as professor was also key to many resources, which we identified. The fact that I work at the university opens doors for others. A document I issue can be seen as a resource that allows someone else to access funding, for example.

Fig. 7.1 Diverse economies iceberg by Community Economies Collective is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

It became clear to us that people are supported not only by monetary relations but also by social ones. Taking time to listen, help, and exchange ideas about working and living conditions with other people is one way to overcome precariousness. Nor is it ever a waste of time to work with, help, or simply give feedback to others. Besides caring for relations, it also contributes to building a network, through which you get commissions, information about calls for bids, or help in other forms. The lower part of the iceberg is also the part that brings in money, that leads to jobs or makes work possible. The iceberg diagram shows that the economy is highly complex and diverse. This insight makes the economy more malleable, because you can begin your efforts to live a less precarious life in many more places.

Another interesting task is to create a resource diagram with traditional successful designers, or with designers you consider successful. This also makes clear that many of these designers are successful because the lower part of their iceberg works so well. So the iceberg is not only relevant to designers who see themselves as

precarious, but also to those who are not. Design studios that take on unpaid interns to do part of their work profit from the fact that these interns are supported by their parents. The iceberg diagram illustrates these types of relationships. On the one hand, it makes it possible to create an awareness of your position in the system; on the other, to develop a sense of self-efficacy that can help you restructure your own system over a longer period of time.

MH Your work focuses mainly on organizational structures – on how people can organize and implement alternative economies and values. At the same time, precarious structures and modes of behavior can manifest themselves in material things – in tools such as business plans that are geared toward competitive behavior, or in the aesthetics of design products that have been created in precarious conditions and replicate precarious structures.

When it comes to changing precarious structures, shouldn't we also be questioning existing tools, materials, and design aesthetics? For example, what would a business plan based on care look like? What new guidelines and aesthetics could ensure that we don't need to work day and night on a design to achieve the desired results? Where do you see connections and what could such work look like?

BE That's an interesting question. Last year we joined the Feral Business Research Network,[9] whose goal is to deconstruct and radically rewrite business plans. With the members of our local and translocal network, we drafted a community and co-management business plan to found a community academy at the Rovereto train station in the Italian Alps. In order to deconstruct the business plan, we used the iceberg diagram as a tool and called it a «community economies business plan.» The idea was to formulate a plan that was subject to the «community economies» logic.

Another important issue is how the aesthetics of products and design work changes if you don't overwork. The moment you have children, for example, you no longer have the time to overwork. If someone is waiting for you at home, you need to finish your work by 5 pm. I think this does influence aesthetics, because you no longer have the time to overworry about perfection. You need to have the confidence that the work you do during this time is perfectly okay. Design education should start by experimenting with restrictions, such as the policy that no one should work in the evening or on weekends. Everyone should write down how many hours they work and then

9 See Feral Business Research Network, https://fo.am/events/feral-business-workshop.

evaluate the results. This could be part of critical reflections on the way we all work and could ideally teach us how not to wear ourselves out.

Jenny Pickerill – a professor of environmental geography and department head at the University of Sheffield – communicates to the public what work she can or is willing to accept. She rejects work that seems pointless to her, such as checking papers already graded by her assistant. Instead, she'll write a letter to the administration, telling them she trusts her assistant. She then posts these statements on Twitter, explaining that she isn't willing to support overwork. She's also published a shadow CV, which includes all the positions she didn't get. In this way, she makes things visible that are often kept secret or aren't sufficiently transparent.

MH At the start of the interview, you mentioned that your role models for design work are no longer design offices, but cooperatives and activist organizations. Following other role models, learning from their structures, and transferring these structures to your own work can be seen as another method for identifying alternative organizational structures for design practice. For instance, in your article «Footprint: A Radical Workers Co-operative and Its Ecology of Mutual Support» (Elzenbaumer / Franz 2018), you analyze the Footprint cooperative and its strategies for creating a supportive collective organization. It's quite a radical example of an alternative organizational form. How can Footprint's support structures be transferred to the design economy in the private sector or in a university context? What other cooperatives do you think are good examples?

BE Over the years, we've asked various cooperatives and collectives how they organize and finance themselves and what goes on behind the scenes. We regard them as designers because their ambition is to shape the world around them. You could say that this understanding of design points in the direction of Manzini's *When Everybody Designs* (2019). They create a framework for themselves and secure all they need. Designers can learn a lot from this attitude.

For example, one thing the Footprint cooperative does that I provocatively propose to introduce at the university is to have people share salaries so that everyone is paid the same amount or with minimal differences. I believe we need to try out such radical restructurings in order to see if they work and to learn what new ways of thinking and acting they make possible.

What's also interesting is that Footprint is part of a national network of activist cooperatives that meet three times a year and support one another in different ways. Problems are discussed, help

is provided, templates for administrative tasks are developed, information and contacts are exchanged across generations, and informal loans are granted. Designers can also learn from this work. They could, for example, establish similar alliances for critical and caring design practices, whatever the degree of informality.

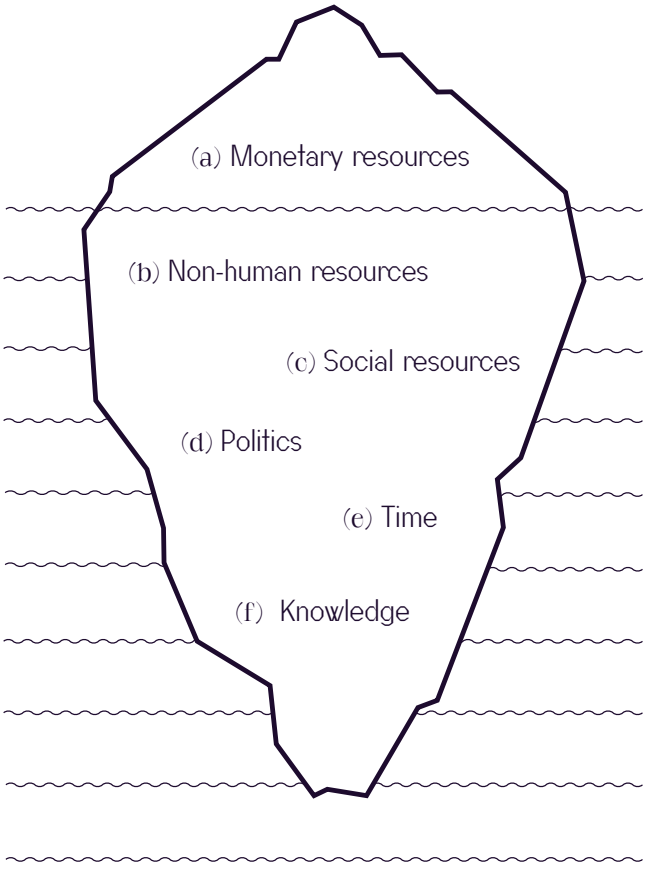
Platform London, a group combining art and activism, has developed a Social Justice Waging System[10] based on the principle that everyone should receive the same basic salary and that this salary should be adjusted upward or downward as a percentage of a core rate depending on each individual's needs. For example, if a person has two children to look after, the salary is raised by a certain percentage, and if they've just inherited an apartment, the salary goes down by a certain percentage, because theoretically they need less. The Social Justice Waging System creates a framework in which everyone is required to discuss and share their situation with others. They're no longer isolated. The question of critical work and how people can afford to perform it becomes a collective issue.

When we looked at housing co-ops and lived in one ourselves, we learned that there are very long processes in many of the projects. Before one of the housing co-ops was founded, for example, its members did years of work to create a network and acquire the necessary knowledge. So, the element of time plays an important role in this context as well. In design programs, projects typically have a very short time frame such as one, maximum two semesters. However, there are topics that require more time – mechanisms must be understood, alliances built, and resources mobilized. Because of the time constraints in design projects, there's a danger that more complex issues will be given too little attention or may become impossible to address at all. The insight that some topics require more time is often neglected in design practice and design training.

We've registered Brave New Alps as an association. When you practice design in an association, you abandon the idea that designers are geniuses. After all, everyone can join an association. Brave New Alps now has more than ten members. If you want to practice design in an alternative way, it's important to experiment with other legal forms. An association or a cooperative allows you see what alternatives are possible. Of course, the options vary in every country. At the very least, they show that design is more than just the content of a project. The entire economic and organizational aspect is part of something we can shape.

10 «Socially Just Waging System», http://platformlondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/social-justice-waging-system-dec-2005.pdf.

Resources that supported the (unpaid) work on the interview with Bianca Elzenbaumer



(No claim for completeness)

Fig. 7.2 Iceberg diagram that visualizes the resources available to the interviewer for the interview.

(a) Indirect financial support by being co-partner of m—d—buero with a monthly salary; Indirect financial support by payments of FHNW Academy of Art and Design for my freelance work as researcher and coordinator for the «Critical by Design?» project.

(b) A roof over my head and all basic resources for living and working; Gifts; Tomato plant and herbaceous plants at home; Access to food; ...

(c) Family support system; Parents and friends inviting for dinner from time to time; Shared lunch at co-working space; ...

(d) Living in Germany, a country with a strong social system; Living in a wealthy country; White person with EU passport; Grew up in an upper middle class family; Cis-woman; ...

(e) Shared time and knowledge of Bianca Elzenbaumer; Extended timeframes for finishing the interview; My weekends and evenings; Without kids; In healthy condition; ...

(f) Long term exchange on these research subjects with friends and colleagues; Support of the editors for providing me with the opportunity to contribute to the publication; Feedback and exchange with the editors and Bianca Elzenbaumer on the article; Translation of the article by paid translator; Two design degrees; Work experience as designer and design reseacher; ...

MH Thank you, Bianca Elzenbaumer, for your time, the interview, and for sharing your research. Your knowledge of how we can question and redesign personal work structures is a great help when it comes to reflecting on and transforming the design economy.

To close the interview, I'd like to share an iceberg diagram that visualizes the resources available to me for the interview (Fig. 7.2). I was only able to conduct the interview thanks to the direct and indirect support of my network, social surroundings and indirect salaries. The interview was made possible not by one, but by many resources – by an interdependent support system. In addition, the visualization of my situation, my social and political positions, and my contextrelated advantages

helped me to become aware of the «relational differences» denoted through precariousness (Lorey [2013] 2015: 19). Visualizing interdependencies makes visible what often remains veiled. However, to include the diagram is meant to be a gesture. It can be read as a thank you to my professional and social network and, following Bianca Elzenbaumers work, as an invitation to share our economic and political structures for politically and socially engaged design and academic work with each other more. To make resources and privileges explicit is an important step for understanding better the structural-economic conditions of our work and to create an awareness of the own situatedness. With this ambition and findings, I conclude the interview by expressing gratitude for this tool and the enriching insights.

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