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# Assemblage of art, discourse and ice hockey: Designing knowledge about work

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## Abstract

This article examines speculative design's capacity to co-produce knowledge about contradictions and potentialities of work in professional ice hockey. Building on the Deleuzian concept of assemblage, speculative design has been used for two purposes: (a) to bring together the perspectives of art, anthropology, discourse studies, and professional sports in co-constructing knowledge about hockey work; and (b) to analyze and present the key findings of an ethnography on hockey work through an art exhibition of speculative hockey memorabilia. As such, these art pieces showed the intertwined relationships of material, discursive, and affective aspects in hockey work as well as the multiplicity of aspirations, challenges, investments, and risks that go into this kind of mobile, unpredictable work. The design process also showed how knowledge production is an emergent process of exchange, dependent on interactions and relationships, and embedded in power relations.

## KEYWORDS

art, assemblage, design, discourse, ethnography, knowledge production, sportsAbstrakti

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Artikkelissa tarkastellaan taiteen ja spekulatiivisen muotoilun hyödyntämistä tutkimustulosten jalkauttamisessa ja tutkimustiedon tuottamisessa. Spekulaatiivista muotoilua hyödynnettiin etnografisessa tutkimuksessa, jossa tarkasteltiin ammattijääkiekkoa liikkuvana työnä. Spekulaatiivista muotoilua sovellettiin deleuzelaisen koosteen käsitteen pohjalta kahteen tarkoitukseen: 1) tuomaan yhteen taiteen, antropologian, diskurssintutkimuksen ja ammattiurheilun näkökulmat jääkiekkotyön tarkastelussa ja 2) analysoimaan ja esittämään jääkiekkoa työnä koskevan etnografian tulokset taidenäyttelyn muodossa. Näyttelyssä esillä olevat spekulatiiviset jääkiekkoesineet osoittivat jääkiekkotyön materiaalisten, diskursiivisten ja affektiivisten puolten yhteenkietoutuneisuuden sekä toivat esiin tähän liikkuvaan ja ennakoimattomaan työhön liittyviä monitahoisia toiveita, investointeja ja riskejä. Muotoiluprosessi puolestaan osoitti tiedontuottamisen luonteen valtasuhteisiin kytkeytyvänä neuvotteluna.



Art, discourse and professional sports may seem like unlikely allies to produce knowledge about work. Yet their convergence offers an opportunity to examine and articulate the embedded, embodied and enacted contradictions and potentialities of the contemporary mobile and unpredictable conditions of work. With partnerships<sup>1</sup> across various fields of knowledge and expertise, including sociolinguistics, discourse studies, anthropology, design, art and sports, a team of designer Luke Cantarella, anthropologist Christina Hegel and discourse analyst Sari Pietikäinen engaged in practices of speculative design to co-produce knowledge about hockey work. Speculative design, a term coined by Dunne and Raby (2013), refers to a wide range of tools, techniques and methods used to create material probes that help in examining past, present and future conditions, practices and concepts related to the social issue at hand (see also Cantarella et al., 2019). In our case, these probes materialised as designed art pieces that respond to particular insights gained from a 4-year ethnography on Finnish professional hockey.<sup>2</sup> These art pieces, exhibited in public and displayed virtually (see <https://www.artofhockey.fi>) illustrate the assemblage of aspirations, challenges, investments and risks to those who make a living in hockey. This kind of knowledge design is one approach to the conception, creation and implementation of research projects in material environments and a way to articulate and engage with the research findings. Producing knowledge in this collaborative, multimodal way across different perspectives and experiences was a gradual process that created a space to critically and creatively reflect on various aspects of hockey work. This visual essay<sup>3</sup> tells the

story of this design process while inviting the reader to see and experience some aspects of hockey work through the lens of art.



## 1 | ART OF HOCKEY

'*Success beyond mere luck*', says Jukka Holtari, a sports manager of a Finnish ice hockey team, when I ask him what is at stake in professional hockey. Jukka has a long and successful career in hockey as an international player, coach, scout and manager, and several championships, including the Stanley Cup, to prove it. He was also a participant<sup>4</sup> in *Cold Rush*, a research project that examines language and identity in emerging Arctic economies, including winter sports. Jukka's short answer captures a core tension in professional sports: how to develop and manage talent to deliver enduring success. This is especially crucial in team sports like ice hockey, where talented individuals can only win as a team. The recipe for success is the seamless amalgamation of soft hockey skills, like teamwork and hockey sense, and hard hockey skills, such as skating, strength and stick handling. This amalgamation calls for a deep desire and devotion to work: thousands of hours of repetition and drilling, year after year, season after season, every morning and evening. Managing this work relies on discourse: pep talks before the game; the multimodal presentation of the game strategy; the narration of team identity; shouted directions on the ice; meticulous video feedback conversations; and negotiations over contracts.

Framing professional hockey as work rather than talent, passion or sports brings forth the internal contradictions and multi-temporality of work in late capitalism, where resources, bodies and skills are constantly measured, valued and transformed into capital and commodities (Martín Rojo, 2018; Pietikäinen & Ojala, 2021). Managing hockey work, as an individual or as a team, is a balancing act between pride/profit, paid/unpaid and play/professionalism (cf. Duchêne & Heller, 2012). Furthermore, similar to many jobs today, hockey work is punctured by unexpected mobilities, temporal contracts and the intense measurement of development and output (Gershon, 2018). Hockey long ago moved from frozen lakes and ponds to multi-purpose indoor arenas where the sport is intertwined with economy and entertainment. This move marked a shift from a community-based hobby into a professional enterprise. Part of the magic of the game is the way it conceals the vast, coordinated labour infrastructure that makes successful moments possible (Pietikäinen & Hegel, forthcoming). Today, ice hockey is a multimillion-dollar global business that includes specialised professions such as mental coaches,

agents, sports managers and equipment managers. For example, Jukka's team employs around 100 people, which makes it an average-sized company in its region. At the same time, hockey needs to be rooted in the local community that produces its critical mass of fans, sponsors and aspirational players (da Silva & Pietikäinen, 2018). The parents of aspirational players create the invisible, unpaid voluntary workforce needed to run game nights, sell concessions and manage security, parking and ticket-taking. A successful team needs to be simultaneously rooted and flowing.



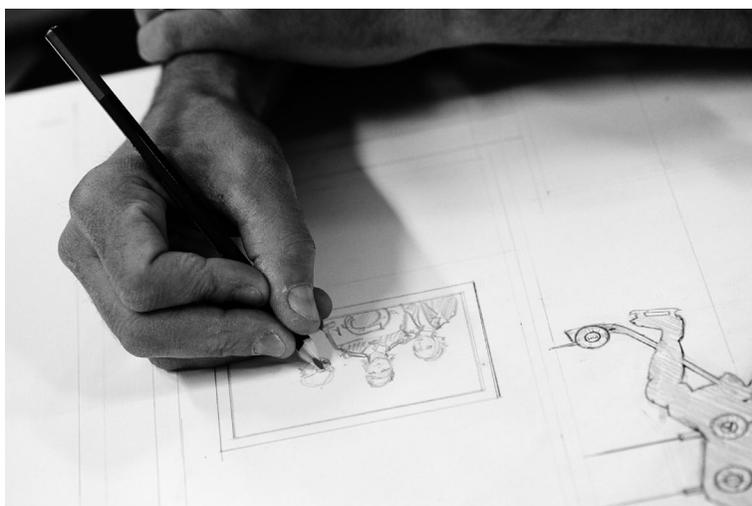
To better understand the multiplicities and contradictions in hockey work, I draw on the concept of **assemblage** by French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (1987). In their work, assemblage means multi-temporal, heterogeneous arrangements of discourses, materialities, bodies and affects, powered by desire and impacted by capitalist transformations (Hamalakis, 2017; Wise, 2005). The concept refers to both the act of assembling diverse elements, like choosing players for a team, as well as the arrangements of these elements for a certain purpose, such as deciding a role for each player on the team to maximise the chances of winning. Importantly, it is the interaction between elements that allows the assemblage to become more than the sum of its parts. So, for example, simply putting ice, skates, a stick, a puck and a body together does not add up to a professional hockey player. Putting several professional hockey players together does not yet make a team. Rather, the players must be brought together under particular conditions and made to function in particular ways to accomplish their conjoined goals to gain productive force (Pietikäinen & Hegel, forthcoming). In this, the role of discourse is vital.

The key in examining hockey work as an assemblage is that it does not flatten the complex relationships between the heterogeneous elements that work is made of, nor does it disregard the ways in which it is intertwined with historical, ongoing and anticipated economic and personal processes and developments. Quite the contrary, hockey assemblage counts in the multiplicity and complexity inherent in hockey work. Bypassing old binaries between material/discursive, form/function and language/society, assemblage shifts the focus from these categories into relationships and interactions between them (Pietikäinen, 2021).

Art resonates with assemblage thinking. Similar to assemblage, art can hold together contradictions. The sense of multiplicity that is contained within art provides a constellation of discursive, material and sensorial aspects that are not organised by regimes of the traditional knowledge production of science. Rather, art can become what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe as a smooth space: a

dynamic, emerging mixture of diverse forces, resources and desires that facilitates discovery and the reconfiguration of connections and relationships as it escapes the grid of stratified thinking. The combination of art and assemblage also brings multiple temporalities into the research process: in addition to past and present, the potential becomes part of the picture. This makes speculative design practices especially productive for examining the assemblage of hockey work.

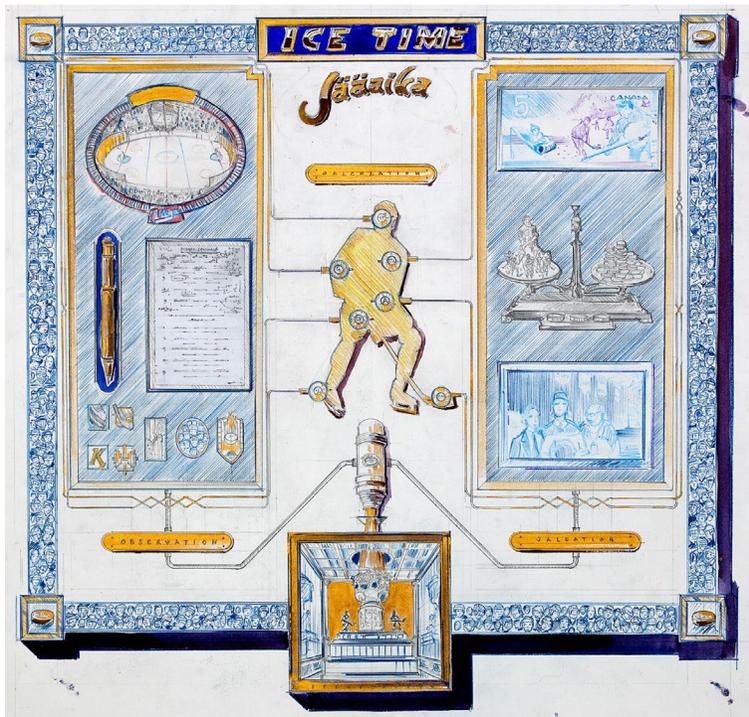
## 2 | SPECULATIVE DESIGN, DISCOURSE INTERVENTIONS AND ETHNOGRAPHIC KNOWLEDGE



Running counter to normative user-centred design methods, speculative design produces objects and spatial organisations that suggest alternative or previously invisible or unnoticed connections, trajectories and relationships, and invite us to question, discover and imagine future developments (Cantarella et al., 2019; Dunne & Raby, 2013). The term ‘speculative’ indicates the fictional status of these designs that are removed from the constraints of the ‘factual’ world to produce alternative products, systems or worlds (Auger, 2013). Cantarella et al. (2019:62) argue that speculation works in an affirmative mode and moves from the actual towards the fantastical. Importantly, this movement is simultaneously creative and critical as it can bring into question the conditions, processes and practices related to a social issue. Using a wide range of methods and techniques, speculative design produces probes that can be objects, texts, photographs, videos, spatial arrangements, etc. (Auger, 2013). These probes create alternative interpretations, set in the future, present or past. Instead of being naïvely optimistic or simply hopeful, speculative design is grounded in both multidisciplinary knowledge and situated ethnography with the goal of finding new solutions and questions (Boylston, 2019; Clarke, 2018; Miller, 2018). Designing probe objects as part of ethnographic inquiry creates a form of analysis of ethnographic encounters that produces responses to analytic propositions, engenders an alternate form of specificity in theory-building and produces something that can be mutually apprehended and altered through a prototyping and iteration process (Cantarella et al., 2019). The speculative design objects, grounded in ethnography, make ideas, connections and processes visible and specific.

Speculative design sits well with both art and assemblage thinking. In these various approaches, the idea of becoming is central: What new, alternative and different configurations become tangible through the interaction of various elements, experiences and perspectives? Similar to other participatory approaches, speculative design practices draw on collaboration and facilitate co-construction of knowledge between different perspectives and positions. In our case, co-designing material objects related to hockey work draws on conversations between knowledge in sports, sociolinguistics and discourse studies, anthropology, and art and design (Cantarella et al., 2018). The objects were co-designed by Christine, Luke and Sari, and the art installation was an outcome of our shared labour.

Typical to speculative design methods, our design process entailed several interrelated phases. First, our analysis was grounded in a 4-year ethnography on a professional Finnish hockey team, complemented by the design team's visits to games and practices at the team's home arena and discussions with some key workers on the team. We found out that much of the hockey work towards success centres on *observations, evaluations, calculations and speculation* regarding the success of a player or a team. Taking these processes as our design starting point, Luke created, in conversation with Sari and Christine, a watercolour painting of these processes with visualisations of key moments and materialisations rooted in the ethnographic data. The painting illustrates, for example, soft and hard skills in hockey, the balancing act between economics and sports, and the ultimate hockey dream: winning the Stanley Cup. Following from our collaborative work, Jukka was invited to provide feedback, which highlighted the need to show how hockey is a team effort.



This pushed the design processes to capture work done beyond the players, coaches and managers to include the often missing or invisible workers behind the game. To include these workers, we designed a photographic case study, focussing on all kinds of work performed in the team's home arena. Photographer Pekka Rötökönen, in collaboration with Sari and Jukka, spent a few weeks at the arena, photographing

mundane work performed by employees and team volunteers. This yielded over 2,000 photographs of work by volunteers, players, coaches, salespeople, restaurant workers, equipment managers, and more, documenting what hockey work looks like as embodied by various types of workers and their jobs. These photographs were used in designed objects, in transforming the trading cards of players into the trading cards of workers. In addition, the photographs were also shown in the exhibition, and a wide selection was given to the team and its workers.



The goal of the **second phase** of the design process was to create concrete, material objects that are grounded in the ethnography and that would speak to key aspects of hockey work done for team success and that would be displayed in an art exhibition. These objects can be seen as what Kester (2013) describes as conversation pieces that are designed to probe, question and engage. At this point in the design process, speculation, as a temporality of design, became an important conceptual and methodological resource for us. Engaging with some of the ideas discussed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), we see speculation as a tool to move beyond past and present to the possible and potential. This resonates with the speculative dimension of hockey work, which includes anticipating and speculating game strategies, success and career moves, to expand on Jukka's comparison of his work to that of brokers who also make their living by excelling at speculation. Since speculation is a particular modality of capitalism (Bear, 2020), intertwining it with the designed objects created a link between hockey work and its economic conditions. Methodologically, speculation also help in distancing the objects from Jukka's hockey team and its realities, and in this way, to bypass issues of presentation and factuality related to the team. Rather, with speculative design, we were able to foreground the processes, practices, experiences, affects and temporalities that figure in hockey work.

Speculation works through discourse, multimodal explanations, future-oriented narratives and affective language, which makes it a particularly productive temporality for language researchers. In addition, one crucial aspect of knowledge design is to design a meta-discourse that involves the describing information through specific visualities, vocabularies, classification systems, taxonomies or naming conventions (Drucker, 2014:66). In creating our speculative discourse, still grounded in the ethnography, our first task

was to create a multimodal identity for our speculative team. After conducting a survey of existing team names that invoked the power of nature (lightning, storm, wind) or animals (lions, bears), we named our team Ukkonen, meaning 'Thunder' in Finnish. This helped with team colours (purple and yellow) and the idea for ornaments and a logo (axe), since Ukkonen also refers to the mythological god Ukko in Finnish. To index economic connections in the hockey industry, we did a survey of hockey sponsors in Finland and fabricated fake logos resembling the originals. We also dove into the world of lucky numbers and superstition in sports, choosing a relatively neutral number for our jersey. Seeing our jersey, Jukka laughed. While it was impressive, he said, Ukkonen was obviously a poor team without a major sponsor whose logo would have branded the most visible part of the jersey, the chest.



To design objects that are grounded in our ethnography and have the potential to weave together hockey work and art while engaging with viewers, we decided to integrate two genres into our designs. First, we adapted a *genre of sport memorabilia*, that is, pucks, photographs, collection cards, jerseys, pins and patches, all of which dedicated fans purchase on game night or online, and teams

and professionals put on display to celebrate their achievements. For us, this meant finding out more about the trajectories of these objects from their production to their consumption, their typical semiotic and material manifestations and the various practices, beliefs and values attached to them. Luke made production notes about the materialities and genres related to planned objects. Through this process we learned, for instance, that the last puck produced in Europe was in 1989. Today pucks are produced in China. We also learned that pins and patches have a long history in Finnish sports, used to index the quality and quantity of sports achievements. This genre of memorabilia provided a material map for developing objects. It also created a link between the history of hockey, the team's hockey work and the viewer's previous sports experiences. The genre organises the connections between objects into an art assemblage of hockey work, and thus provides a frame for viewers to approach the installation of objects and make sense of them.



In producing objects for the exhibition, we employed the curator genre, familiar to visitors to museums and exhibitions. Drawing on our ethnography, we first wrote a background story for each object to explain the connections to the ethnographic data and our intentions: What the object showed about hockey work, suggestions for materiality and some background information, for example, shapes, colours, etc. of such objects. Later, these background stories were developed into speculative narratives about the objects, using the genre of curatorial explanations to foreground the work the object was doing. The curator genre strengthens the link between designed objects and the practices of art exhibition, helping create a temporally 'smooth space' for discovery. The stories also aimed at orienting the viewer to make links between the designed object, sport, work and art. We know from other contexts that discourses and genres have the power to de- and re-territorialise objects and practices; to make them mobile, moveable and malleable for purposes different than the original ones (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes, 2011).

*Ukkonen's team of expert trainers spends hours each day with players in the gym and on the ice to increase their endurance and strength. Coaches also drill players on stick skills and skating techniques, including crossover skating and edgework, specific to each player's needs. A good hockey player must also be mentally strong and adaptive. Our team has routinely produced high achieving hockey players who are individually competitive and team players par excellence. The most elusive skill of all, many would argue, is hockey sense, that ability to read the game, to anticipate where the puck is at all times and to make good decisions without hesitation in the course of play. Our coaches have excelled at cultivating a high degree of hockey sense in generations of Ukkonen players.*



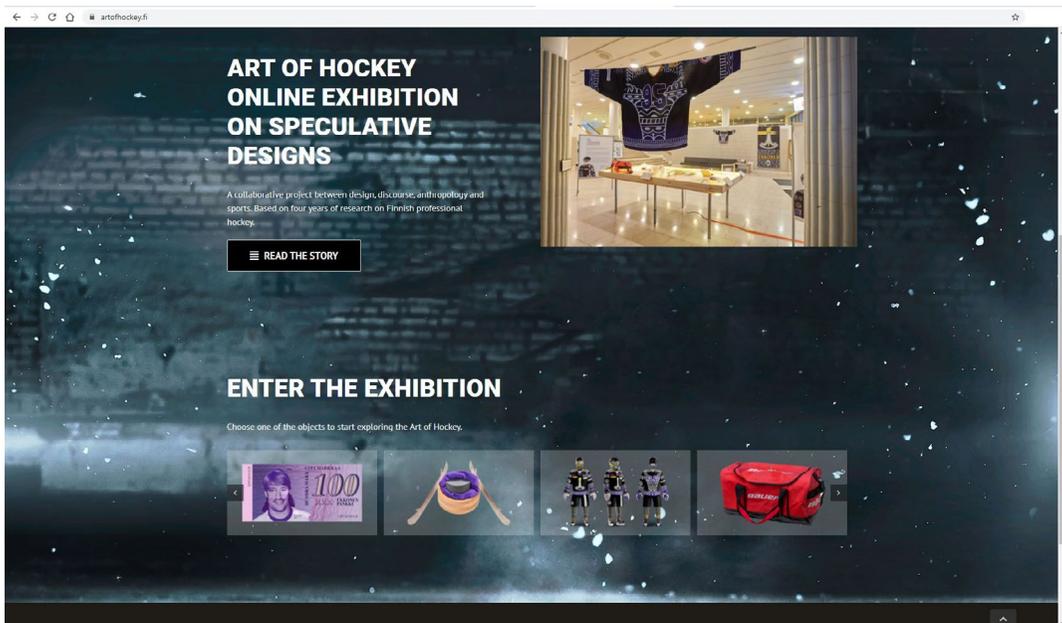
SKILL PINS AND SPIRIT PATCHES

*Although players' achievements in these areas are recognised through the awarding of custom-made pins and patches in an intimate postseason ceremony, it is truly the whole crew that pushes our players to new heights.*

With these conceptual and design resources, we developed an imagined team named Ukkonen (Thunder in Finnish), with eight speculative hockey memorabilia objects: (1) skill pins and patches, (2) team jersey, (3) a bag with a dream trophy, (4) trading cards, (5) blades and a puck, (6) hockey currency, (7) a pen, and (8) a snow globe. This collection has been designed to illustrate the rhizome of aspirations, challenges and investments for those who make a living in ice hockey. The exhibition's entire spatial organisation was designed to serve as a bridge between sports and art. The objects and individual narratives were displayed on a huge stylised ice hockey rink, built by our team for the exhibition, and it was placed in a university sports facility, near the team arena. With a different connection to hockey work, the designed object vibrates on a slightly different wavelength, producing an art assemblage of hockey work.



The installation ‘Feel the Thunder’ was displayed for 3 weeks on Jyväskylä university grounds, and a version appeared at the 2018 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. An estimated more than 1,000 people saw it, including many team workers who seemed both surprised and delighted with the designed objects, especially those closely linked to their job. Jukka commented on the importance of making visible the usually invisible labour and range of work that goes into hockey. Based on notes by two research assistants who observed the exhibition on 7 days, viewers were intrigued by the objects, spent time looking at them, took them into their hands, peered into the bag and read the stories. Speaking to one another or writing in the guest book, they shared memories related to sports, while some asked for more details about the objects or the research project. Other guests commented on the fruitfulness of this kind of knowledge production as a way to communicate research results.



The third phase of the design process included an online exhibition of objects at Art of Hockey (www.artofhockey.fi). Together with our team, and with the services of web designers, the Art of Hockey was designed to translate the material exhibition into a virtual exhibition. Transforming the material exhibition, in a particular time and place into a two-dimensional virtual version required some design adjustments. For example, we paid special attention to the quality of the picture to balance the two-dimensionality; we inserted audio when possible to enhance the multisensorial experience; and developed a shared visual genre framing the objects to increase a sense of connectivity between objects.

## 3 | SENSE OF ART IN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION



Art has the potential to make connections, foster collaboration and produce knowledge (Budach & Sharoyan, 2020; Goldstein, 2019; Jäntti & Loisa, 2018). Both art and sports can be productively understood as assemblages, given that the concept highlights interactions, emergent capacities and often unrecognised connections. In addition, both entail future temporalities, which makes art and sports allies for speculative design. The co-production of knowledge through speculative design practices created a shared kitchen table for our team, around which we were able to explore, make sense of and negotiate what our data tell about hockey work and how to articulate our findings as material objects framed by discourse and grounded in ethnography. This kind of co-designing of knowledge implies a willingness among team members to engage with new ideas and ways of working and to transcend their own disciplines and areas of expertise. Digital and multimodal communication as well as creating art pieces with narratives rooted in the hockey ethnography require new skills, ranging from technological affordances to managing multiple temporalities. The creation of productive knowledge designs depends on conceptual, material, discursive and critical skills as well as technical expertise. Above all, it requires imagining and understanding the connections and interactions between these, which in why the concept of assemblage offered a crucial bridging concept.

Designing knowledge through art is both creative and critical. It can take into account the continuous unfolding of possibilities and implications for change for a broad range of stakeholders. In our case, art was a way to critically reflect on hockey as work, especially by identifying and showing visible, invisible, intended and unintended connections and consequences related to the multiplicity of hockey work. It also allowed us to engage with different forms of knowledge, produced from different positions and with different modalities to bring them together in a dynamic composition of knowledge designs exhibited in the art exhibition. These new constellations enable us to see hockey work in this multiplicity. Echoing the anthropological view, ‘make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange’, when it comes to knowledge production (Miller, 2018), speculative design of knowledge taps into strategies of reflection, dislocation, unexpected connections and novel combinations. As an assemblage, the art exhibition brought into interaction ethnographic materials, different perspectives and modes of knowledge, and enabled creative and critical reflections about hockey work. Employing assemblage as a design concept helped in escaping binary structure as a dominant structuring principle – the tree structure of hierarchies – and focused on both enduring and emergent, even potential, interactions and connections between elements in the assemblage. Assemblage approach also offered ways to move beyond the traditional tensions between order and structure, form and content, endurance and change, essence and process, and the material and the discursive. Thus, knowledge is not ‘content’

delivered in buckets or units, but a generative process of exchange, the design of which is dependent on a set of contingent and distributed relations between many levels of human, material and technical infrastructure (Drucker, 2014; Kjaersgaard, 2013).

The critical aspect of designing knowledge comes from a recognition that all knowledge production is embedded in power relations. As powerfully formulated by Foucault (1969/2013) in his power-knowledge constellation, our ways of knowing are intertwined with our ways of seeing and speaking about the world. From this perspective, knowledge does not work outside of economic, political and personal interests and investments, historical and material conditions, or affective and material consequences. This is also what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to when arguing that the organisation of the assemblage is embedded in power relations (Pietikäinen, 2021; Sauvagnargues, 2013).

By extension, this idea also applies to this research and to the ways in which we have produced knowledge. Designing knowledge through art responses ensures that research has social impact and results in rethinking and changing modes of engagement. Given that knowledge is the main resource of late capitalism and neoliberal governance of universities and research institutions, this production of new knowledge in 'critical' and 'creative' ways may therefore be, at the very same time, both critical of and complicit with knowledge capitalism (Braidotti, 2019). In our case, the blending and weaving of art, design, discourse, sports and ethnographic knowledge and practice produced a moment for reflection on the assumptions and frameworks surrounding hockey work. The art of hockey designs showed the multiplicity of hockey work and especially the important role of invisible work by supporting staff, volunteers and fans. It also highlighted the role of discourse in the embodied work of hockey professionals in engaging, motivating and making sense of the game's wins and losses. As an assemblage, knowledge designs open up to multiple interpretations. They do not produce a single essential or universal truth. Rather, they vibrate with the past, the present and future potentialities.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank all the participants who made the ethnography of hockey work possible. My thanks also go to Luke Cantarella, Christina Hegel, Jukka Holtari, Pekka Rötönen and Pasi Itkonen for fruitful collaboration and valuable input for this article at its various stage. I am also very grateful for the insightful comments by the reviewers. Finally, I would like to thank the participants of the *Alternative Interpretations: Displacing Knowledge Production* Fall School 2019 at the University of Fribourg, for your useful feedback. All remaining shortcomings of this article are naturally my responsibility alone.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data not available due to ethical restrictions.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The team for *Art of Hockey* included discourse analyst Sari Pietikäinen (University of Jyväskylä) designer Luke Cantarella (Pace University), anthropologist Christine Hegel (Western Connecticut State University), hockey professional Jukka Holtari and photographer Pekka Rötönen, who has taken all the pictures shown in this article. The technical support for the website and for this publication was provided by Pasi Itkonen (University of Jyväskylä).
- <sup>2</sup> This study is part of Cold Rush research project, where we study language and identity in expanding Arctic economies. The project is funded by the Academy of Finland (296564). More about project, see <https://coldrushweb.wordpress.com>.
- <sup>3</sup> I want to thank all the participants who made the ethnography of hockey work possible. My thanks also go to Luke Cantarella, Christina Hegel, Jukka Holtari, Pekka Rötönen and Pasi Itkonen for fruitful collaboration and valuable input for this article at its various stage. I am also very grateful for the insightful comments by the reviewers. Finally, I would like to thank the participants of the *Alternative Interpretations: Displacing Knowledge Production* Fall School 2019 at the University of Fribourg, for your useful feedback. All remaining shortcomings of this article are naturally my responsibility alone.
- <sup>4</sup> Jukka chooses to be identified by his name.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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