Looking at collaborations

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My starting point is the considerable growth of collaborative practices, both in the crafts, design, and art that have been noticeable during the last five to ten years. I will approach this issue from a number of viewpoints, including the idea of the possibility of a socially or collectively determined design process and the difference between this idea and the notion of individual authorship. The lecture will also touch upon the question of the artefact as something changeable and constantly developing rather than something static. I will also make some comments about whether a collective work process might be considered an artwork in its own right, or not.

I will be talking first of all about the Swedish scene, which – of course – is the one that I am most familiar with. However I do believe that the questions I address are not tied to a national discussion but have a more general significance, too.

I will start with a short theoretical introduction, and then go on by showing and discussing some examples of collaborative work, drawn from the contemporary scene as well as from the 1970s.

Looking at contemporary Sweden, one can easily observe that a large part of the young designers and craftspeople who have made their debut in recent years have been acting as groups or collectives. The reasons that lie behind their choice of working methods are various, but in general they all share an interest in social processes. These processes represent not only the creative practices of the individual groups, and their both practical and symbolical implications, but also the broader social setting that surrounds the work and its results.

The relationship between maker and object, and object and user, are at the heart of many of the projects that have been put forward by these groups. The artefact, the man-made object, is here conceived of as something that gains its meaning and value not solely from an individual, privileged maker’s fingerprints but rather from a socially determined process, a process that involves interaction, change, and the passing of time.

I am talking here about the ambition, clearly visible in much of today’s crafts, to make works that in their very conception carry and express the idea of changeability. The object is perceived of as something in a state of flux, something that takes on different shapes and functions in different settings. In this view, the individual artwork does not receive its main significance from its maker, but rather from other people’s handling of it, and its passage through different social, economical or symbolical systems.

This shift in perspective, and its eventual displacement of the traditional status of the finished, static work of art, does not only reflect a somewhat new view on making. It also hints toward the need of rethinking our concepts of using and experiencing. The makers I am talking about in this context do not only frequently engage in projects that involve close collaboration with their colleagues; almost as a rule, they also seek to engage in a dialogue with their possible audience. The very idea of creating unfinished works, pieces that yearn for completion by

someone else, inevitably involves the notion of the audience as a collaborator. The spectators, the owners, the users all somehow become the artists' collaborators.

Needless to say, this artistic stance includes a desire to get out of the white cube of the museum or the gallery in order to act and interact in daily life, in real time, on street-level so to speak. Last year's *Wrapping Hood* exhibition in Middlesbrough, described earlier today by its curator Susan Pietzsch, is but one example. And this movement is not new. From the history of modern art we know the ambition to overcome the division between art and life as a persistent feature of the avant-garde.

What perhaps marks off crafts and design from art in this discussion, though, is that a social setting and a practical use of things cannot be said to have ever been alien to crafts and design. In comparison to art, the crafts have traditionally a more marked connection to the everyday, to the useful and to the wearable. Jewellery, fashion, and tableware are all examples of areas within the crafts that generally have been, and still are, aimed for a social context rather than a museum display. This marks a clear difference compared to the mainstream of post-war art, which in many respects have been made to fit the large-scale modernist museum building rather than the private home or the context of an intimate encounter.

To sum up, there is today a growing awareness in the crafts that the field's historical ties to social life, social behaviour, conspicuous consumption – all the drama of reality – can be used as a meaningful artistic point of departure. And judging from my own experience, this interest in the social aspects of crafts often coincides with a desire to create working conditions that allow for the work to be shaped by a group rather than an individual. And, subsequently, the final work may be symbolically handed over to the audience, to be renegotiated and physically altered.

Several, if not all, of these aspects come together in the work of the Swedish design group Uglycute [Image #1]. This group, which was formed about six years ago, consists of one architect, one interior designer and two artists. This image [Image #2] shows one the group's interior designs, constructed in 2004 for a then new-opened art institution in a Stockholm suburb, concentrated upon relational art. The premises earlier hosted an office. Instead of emptying the room of its original fittings, the group chose to keep them. So the fluorescent tubes were left in the ceiling, and desks and other fittings were only fairly covered with a grey carpet. The staff of the art gallery, as well as the visitors, was encouraged to rework the design, for instance by attaching things to the wall-covering carpet or cutting holes in it, thereby putting their own mark on the interior. As we also can see from this image, some of the newly constructed furniture consisted of simple wooden stools.

This interior, in its relative crudeness, reflects some recurring features of the designs of Uglycute, namely their use of basic, low-tech construction methods and inexpensive materials. And it is also these features that seem to allow for a generous attitude towards the possibility for the users to alter or re-shape the work. The materials are not valuable, and not much time has initially been spent on giving them shape.

In some ways, the aesthetics of Uglycute and other similar design groups are close to a 'crafty', hands-on attitude towards material, as opposite to the smoother, slicker manner one associates with the mainstream design industry. However, if compared to traditions in the crafts, there is marked difference in Uglycute's approach since the group generally do not

seem to invest any significant symbolic value in their own process of making. Instead they often seem to suggest that their work is fulfilled only when being used and altered by others.

[Image #3] Here is another example of Uglycute's work, a series of small circular tables. The central leg of each table is covered with a thick layer of soft material that allows the owner to influence the shape of the leg, for instance by attaching straps. In this way everyone can design his or her own make-believe version of a lathe-turned, decorative leg.

Maybe I should add that generally, I am not fully convinced that collective work, inexpensive materials and changeable designs by implication represent a paved way to 'democratic design'. However I do have respect for the works of groups like Uglycute, devoted as they are to the idea of making designs that can function both in a practical way and as a starting point for discussions on the power and values that permeates our architectural environment.

Furthermore, another interesting aspect of collaboration that has been brought to the forefront by the members of Uglycute is the quality that eventually can be found in compromising. There is an obvious difference between an artwork that is a single person's self-sufficient creation, and a work that is the result of a collaborative process.

Whenever people come together, they need to compromise. It is as simple as that. In the heroic image of the avant-garde artist or designer, however, compromise is traditionally seen as something negative, something that threatens the vision or the integrity of the artist's genius. In architecture, this cult of the uncompromising vision might be said to have led up to the construction of our post-war, large-scale suburban housing areas. On the one hand this city planning did reflect a strong vision, but on the other hand it often resulted in a built environment that was actually impoverished and inhospitable.

As a way of escaping from this artistic ivory tower, architects and designers today often prefer to make objects or environments in which the vision is not the achievement of an aesthetically and practically fixed solution. Instead, what becomes the vision is the creation of an interactive object or environment, a design that fulfils its intentions only when being handled or altered according to its owner's own wishes. The maker or designer in some way lets go of the power over his or her work. The compromise, the solution that makes the demands of different people's wishes and ambitions come together, here becomes a significant idea rather than something that undermines the artists' work.

[Image #4] Here is Front, another Swedish design group. Front consists of four women educated in industrial design. In a project in 2003, called *Design by animals*, Front presented a series of usable objects that had been given their shape through the actions of animals. [Image #5] Here is a lamp that received its shape from a partial cast of a rabbit's hole dug in the ground. [Image #6] This is a vas that is also a cast, this time from the imprint of a leg made by a dog walking in deep snow. Other objects in this series make use of the actions of snakes, rats and even flies. In subsequent project, the members of Front have continued investigating ways of determining a design by random or by external powers.

These projects are particularly interesting as they outspokenly question the notion of individual, human authorship. Of course any collective project in some way sets individuality aside. But since a considerable part of the design process here has been handed over to anonymous animals, the aura of the human fingerprint has been even further diminished. Here one can detect not only a critique against the cult of the 'star' designer, but also a commentary

on the claims of originality and authenticity that are associated with a modernist view on creative work. The artist or designer as a star, a hero, is also for the most part a role that has been played by male designers. Thus, in some of the works from Front, one can detect an underlying feminist critique towards the notion of the male genius, a notion that has been so important for society's general understanding of creativity, art and the shaping of modern society.

In conclusion, in the works of these groups we meet a post-modern influenced critique against both the notion of a privileged, individual authorship and the idea of fixed, universal artistic solutions. Moreover, the collective structures of the groups appear to be fundamental in their approach to these issues.

Of course, the groups I have been talking about here are not the only ones to have dwelled on the subjects of changeable design or the dynamics of the collective. Surely you are all familiar with Gijs Bakker's and Renny Ramaker's Amsterdam-based Droog design. In some respects, Droog design can be regarded as a source of inspiration, or even a role model, for the Swedish groups that I have mentioned.

However there are also, in a national Swedish context, other predecessors that might be just as important. Today, many people point to the similarities between the crafts and design groups of recent years and the multitude of collective projects that marked the crafts community of the late 1960s and the70s. These years, in Sweden as elsewhere in the west, were a time of awakening political consciousness. In the crafts, this was expressed through the incorporation of images and references to current political questions, for instance in the form of tapestries and even bowls of silver that commented on the war in Vietnam. There was an outspoken desire to engage with a larger set of questions than had been offered by crafts' conventional aesthetics. Apart from the assimilation of political imagery, these years also saw the development of a subtler, elaborate way of commenting on society and values. In some cases one can see clear parallels to the issues that are at stake today.

[Image #7] Here we see a variable textile by the textile artist Margareta Hallek made in the revolutionary year of 1968. It consists of a wooden frame in which a multi-coloured, pleated piece of textile is arranged by the help of straps. The artist's intention was that her audience should have the opportunity to alter the shape of the textile by stretching or un-stretching the straps. This is one of many works in which Margareta Hallek tried to develop a 'democratic' textile art – artworks that allowed for anyone to leave his or her own temporary mark. Obviously, a work like this anticipates many of the qualities that are so sought-after by makers in today's craft and design.

What perhaps makes this particular piece stand out in comparison with a lot of other similar democratically minded works is that it seems to encompass also a critical, feminist dimension. The central flexible textile piece can be interpreted as an image of the female body, symbolically trapped in a geometrical, narrow space and subjected to society's endless corrections and alterations. This possible meaning of the work points to the fact that changeability and flexibility are concepts that do not always have a given correlation with a concept such as participation. Change *can* be associated with force, rather than with choice. And the space for 'interaction' does always have its limits.

If Margareta Hallek's variable textile is strikingly complex in its simultaneous exploration of different levels of power, imagery, and physical interaction, some of her colleagues at the

tome expressed their political standpoint in a more straightforward way. In the catalogue of a joint exhibition in 1975 called *Verkligheten sätter spår* [Reality leaves traces], a group of ten Swedish women textile artists self-confidently declared that their decision to work in close collaboration and to exhibit together as a group was determined by 'social and political responsibility'. For them, an artist had a duty to engage in political issue together with colleagues in order to bring about changes in society.

[Image #8] One of the most well known international examples of an artistic collaboration from these years is of course the American artist Judy Chicago's installation piece *The Dinner Party*. This mixed media work was completed in 1979, after five years of production involving the commitment of hundreds of volunteering students and artists' colleagues. This piece, as you know, is a work that honours the achievements of feminist pioneers from around the world. However, this work also points to the conflicts that can occur in collaborative projects concerning authorship and artistic copyright. Judy Chicago was criticised by some because the project, even though it had a collective structure, was finally presented under her individual name. This meant, critics argued, that she had merely adopted the patriarchal structure of the artists' studio that we know from the old masters of the Renaissance.

Well, that was a parenthesis. To go back to the group of Swedish textile artists I was talking about earlier, their work drew heavily on the tradition of social realism of the 1930s. [Image #9] Here is a typical work from the *Reality leaves traces* exhibition, a tapestry by Sandra Ikse depicting a mother with child in front of an anonymous, stylised high-rise. The windows and the balconies of the concrete slab building that makes up the background of the image here takes on the shape of a grid, a fence – a repressive structure that sets a limit for the space that the humans can occupy. This is a critique of exactly that rigid architectural environment that many designers today so passionately try to avoid or undermine.

A major goal for these textile artists was to express, as a group, solidarity with under-privileged groups in the world, such as other women, children and people in developing countries. As I mentioned earlier, they even saw this as their responsibility. Here lies perhaps one of the most important differences between the groups of today and the groups of the 1970s. Today it is rare to hear artists or craftsmen declare that they collaborate with colleagues because they feel it is their duty or responsibility. And if artists today want to express solidarity with under-privileged groups in society, they are more likely to trying to engage people from these groups in artistic projects rather than making them the motif of their art. And please note that I do not intend to dismiss neither contemporary art nor the political art and crafts of the 70s; I only want to point out that the conditions are different.

To sum up, an artists' group today is probably not based on a shared feeling of social responsibility, but on the fact that many artists find it fun and worthwhile to work together. However, I sometimes wonder if structures in the art world itself have not also been quite influential regarding the growth of collaborative projects.

Among the jet-set of the contemporary art world, the artists' role can be the one of a nomad, a traveller, or perhaps even a bit like Chuck Berry – a solo rock star on a never-ending tour, popping up here and there to play gigs with various local musicians. There exists a small but influential group of internationally acclaimed artists whose working place preferably is the temporary exhibition site, the biennial, or the artist-in-residence programme. And to become a part of this attractive circle, you need to be an artist who likes to collaborate.

The directors of any artist-in-residence-programme are more likely to give the preference to an artist who has a record of collaborations rather than one who prefers to work in concentration and solitude in his or her studio. This comes almost natural.

But as a result, the temporary, half-hearted artistic collaboration project can in some ways be said to have become a plague of our time. It has even developed a cliché imagery of its own. I am sure you have all seen it sometimes at various project rooms or biennials: some scribble or post-it stickers on the walls, a mess of electrical cords, perhaps a few load-speakers or some projections or technical devices that not always work, and a pile of beer crates – all of it presented as, say, an exciting encounter between young artists from three different continents. Usually, it looks something like this [Image #10].

The point I want to make here is that a collaborative structure does not excuse a weak work or a weak idea. Still, there is a great deal of romanticism attached to the idea of collaboration. This romanticism implies that any artistic collaboration is valuable in itself. The eventual final result, the objects, the exhibition, the happening, the DVD, the semi-scientific research report, or whatever, becomes secondary because the collective process itself is put forward as a work of art. To me, this is often quite pretentious.

The design groups I discussed earlier generally avoid falling in this trap because they have a focus on the process that starts after that their own work is finished. They do not present their own collective working process as their major achievement.

In conclusion, I think there are reasons to questions the idea that any work process, be it an individual or a collective one, is a work of art. This leads me to my final examples, and – at last – I will now be talking about jewellery. For a while, I have been following an on-line, collective jewellery project initiated by Paula Lindblom, a young Swedish jeweller. This project, simply called *The on-line jewellery project*, started out in 2005 and offered an opportunity for jewellers to engage in a formalised, web-based discussion forum where the development of their work is documented. The theme of the project is consumer society, and some of the questions that are at stake are what role the remains of this society– the rubbish, the junk, and the flea-market stuff – can play in a jewellery context. Here one can detect a link to some of issues I discussed earlier, namely the status of the object as an artefact and a commodity, and the changes it undergoes when moving between different functions and social arenas.

Paula Lindblom describes that her idea behind the collaborative structure was that jewellers in different countries would get the chance to work together under a given theme, communicating, discussing their work, and following the development of their colleagues. Visitors to the site are also encouraged to post comments of their own. [Image #11] Here are two images from the website, a pair of brooches by a Swedish participant. There are countless images on the website, these are just samples.

The kind of contacts between artists that this project offers is not new, of course. But what might be fairly new is that the group's discussion here has gone public. The participating jewellers generously let anyone with web access follow their internal communication – and even their conflicts. The tensions and disappointments that have developed in the project are not veiled. Quite a few participants have left the project, in the end leaving a core of five jewellers. When scrolling through the archive, one can find a lot of messages that mirrors some participants' frustration over the limited efforts of others: 'I'm a little disappointed

about this on-line project…'; 'Following deadlines is quite important in our adult life and specially if you want to accomplish something as an artist', etcetera.

Furthermore, it is said on the website that 'the blog has become an art piece in itself'. But, again, as much as I like this project and its ambitions, I have to raise doubts about the artistic value of the blog. I would argue that it is not more of an artwork than any blog on the web. And *if* this blog is an artwork, the artistic means it makes use of is pretty weak. Some posted messages are interesting, but a lot of them are not. There is a lot of repetition, and the English is often poor.

My point is that this blog is interesting, but mainly as a documentation of the collective work process and not really as an artwork in its own right. When, as in this project, the final outcome is supposed to be an exhibition of jewellery, it does not make sense to elevate the production process to become an independent piece of art. If the collective discussion were the artwork, there would be no need for the participants to make jewellery and collect it for an exhibition, would it?

Finally I want to underline that despite my doubts regarding the artistic value of the blog itself, I am very fond of this collaborative initiative. I am also looking forward to the exhibition of the works that have been carried out by the participants during the project. This exhibition will be touring Europe next year, with dates booked in Norway, Sweden and Poland so far. Do have a look on the website [www.jewelleryproject.blogspot.com]!

'Looking at collaborations' was the title I chose for this lecture. I have tried to do just that. In my own work as a critic and writer it is natural to take on the role of an onlooker, a spectator. However, you can always question if this position offers the best possibilities to understand and fully appreciate artistic projects that have a loose, collective structure and wish to make their audience into active participants.

I guess that I should now present an answer to this – a conclusion. But instead I will end by posing you a question: is it enough to only look at collaborations, or do you have to participate to really understand what is going on?

Additional comments, June 27, 2006:

After the lecture there were some questions and comments from the audience regarding the possible flexibility of artworks or design objects. Amongst others, Castello Hansen argued that the examples I had been discussing in the lecture hardly fulfil the intentions of a user-influenced design, since they seem to offer only a very limited space for the owner's/user's own creativity. This is an important issue, and I do agree that the possibility of altering the shape of a leg of a table, for instance, may be regarded as a mere sign of interaction rather than as an accomplishment of the real idea. However, objects like this function on several levels and in some cases the symbolical meaning can justly be regarded the most important.

Still, works like these often suffer from being reduced to symbolic pieces, as when included in museum collections. It is of course an irony that flexible design objects often belong to that kind of avant-garde production that museums love to collect. And as soon as they are in the collections, their state of flux is over – otherwise they would risk getting worn. From one perspective, though, this highlights one of the issues that the makers themselves seem to be

interested in, namely the change in value and position that occur when an object is moved from one social arena to another.

References:

Now when the lecture is published on the website I would also like to give some additional references.

The works of the design groups Uglycute and Front can be spotted at www.uglycute.com and www.frontdesign.se respectively.
The similarities and differences between Swedish crafts collectives of the 70s and recent years are discussed in Pernilla Åbrink's essay "The Silent Heroes", in Love Jönsson (ed.), *Craft in Dialogue: Six Views on a Practice in Change*, Stockholm: IASPIS 2005, p. 57-77. The book can be ordered from www.iaspis.com/craft
The works and ideology of the artists' group behind the *Reality Leaves Traces* exhibition is documented in the exhibition catalogue *Verkligheten sätter spår*, Gothenburg: The Röhss Museum 1975 [published in Swedish only].
Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, now in Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, is presented at www.judychicago.com. My brief account of some of the critique against her project draws on Edmund de Waal, *20th Century Ceramics*, London: Thames & Hudson 2003, p. 192f.