

Design as Craft. Performativity and Interpellation in Design History

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Abstract

Teaching design history to future designers poses great challenges to me as an academic in the design field. There is a constant need to further describe and analyze how design and its history continuously are being made. The role of the designer implies the crafting of artefacts or at least an ability to communicate the possibility of them being materialized. Design history has mainly focused on the object. Some concern has been directed towards the consumer aspect and the societal context, an approach that ultimately should raise questions as to what kind of performative action is needed to make design and its history.

This paper presents part of a research project dealing with the performative aspects of craft practice. In the project, gender and genre in craft-, art- and design magazine are being examined from a critical perspective, focusing on the discursive limits at play. The project explores the performative aspects of practical skills by studying how notions of gender are used to communicate craft- or hand made aspects of the design process. In this paper I will discuss how the discursive limits of design have been conceptualized in Swedish design history and how representations of art-, craft- and design- making in magazines relate to the historical narrative.

The Do-It-Yourself and the “critical making” aspects of contemporary design have opened my eyes to these questions. I believe that a design history with a critical approach to norms and habits in design practice answers to crucial questions such as: What works as incentive to do design? What makes a person think that she or he can be a designer? Or make a difference? In the long run perhaps the practitioners in their making the objects of their trade can also challenge the limitations of both genre and genre.

KEYWORDS: handicraft, historiography, gender, critical making.

Introduction

*who we are rises directly from what our bodies can do (Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 2008, p. 290)*

*Agency is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices in the enactment of a causal structure. (Karen Barad "Posthumanist Performativity" in *SIGNS*, 2003, p. 827)*

Future designers are bound to challenge history and yet they start of from practices they perceive as being successful, historically. This can be said judging from the present as well as the past. Some of these future designers are currently my students. As a design historian I can supply fuel to this process. It's important to discuss the pros and cons of the design canon, its implications and contradictions. In teaching design history at design schools the most acute issue seems to be the need to further describe and analyze how design and its history continuously are *being made*, and to discuss how norms may be un-done, in actual practice.

The citations above point to some exponents of the wide field of research that might be called critical performance studies. My hopes are that the inclusive approach of Richard Sennett as well as Karen Barad's hope for the possibilities of agency in the enactment of a structure can be the guiding principles in the crafting of our future design history. Sociologist Richard Sennett describes the self-staging of the master in a craft-based event where actions—recognized as skilful gestures—are leading to a desired result. His examples come from as different areas as computer programming, carpentry, politics, cooking and visual art making where social consequences are built into the structure and the functioning of the human body, as in the workings of the human hand (Sennett, 2008, p. 290). Sennett's approach has been called a "practically-oriented philosophy of difference". (Røed, 2011). Sennett tries to fuse abstract thinking and manual labour in a radical way, based on the notion that both activities are based in technique and skills. I think time has come to rethink the belief that the incentive or motivation of the design object itself suffices and try out the attraction of crafting.

In this paper I point to how the body politics of craftspeople, designers and artists alike, might benefit the historiographical as well as the practical design process. The importance of the concepts of *performativity*, the visual representations of craft in design history, and the compelling reasons for wanting to participate—the *interpellation* of craft—will be discussed accordingly, starting with the latter.

Interpellation of craft

In his seminal text on ideology from 1970 Louis Althusser says: “*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of the subject.” (Althusser, 2012, p. 130). In one of his examples, the caller is proposed to be a policeman with the actual working law behind his call. So, for example, if someone on the street calls for you, there are a few decisive factors as to whether this request calls for action on your part. Firstly, you must understand the words. Secondly you must trust or recognize the authority of that someone who makes the call. Thirdly, the contextual situation of the action makes sense to you. In other examples Althusser discusses the church and its naming rituals. The notion of interpellation is used to describe what signifies the naming of an individual by a certain ideology, what makes a person a subject to the current order, tradition or actual laws. The linguistic as well as the performative aspects have been picked up by post-structuralist philosophers and gender theorists. A critical gender perspective adds to this discussion a focused attention to the power and the subject and the circumstance that the interpellation itself simultaneously recognises and individualises the subject, restricting the potential of some others. (cf. Butler, 1997; Edenheim, 2005). Looking at the field of design, this critical perspective might be used to describe how the tradition, the order and the ideology effects the bodies that matter in craft and design history. The law and the naming are important in defining who is called to be(ing) also in design history:

There is something to be said for taking a political stance against 'naming'. For when history acknowledges all designers, even those who remain unnamed and anonymous, it overturns the hierarchy that reserves the right to distinguish the so-called 'best' from the rest and makes anti-heroes of them all. And everyday life as a key conceptual tool can serve to show up the overlapping liminal and marginal spaces—the interstices of history that appear with the deconstruction of boundaries that demarcate normative power relations, disrupt gender definitions and the crude assumption of binary opposites rather than a dialectic relationship between male and female. (Attfield 2003, p. 85)

Judith Attfield calls not only for the everyday life as a staging of design history's objects but also for a long term strategy of thinking, one that positions women as creative subjects in design history. I will return later in this paper to a case study of Swedish Handicraft that highlight some instances in Swedish design history when the legislative power has been involved in inscribing some and expel others from the field of professional design. For the moment it will suffice to state that it is clear that the definitions of what counts as design and designers—as objects or subjects—are not always the same throughout history. The same function can be described in different terms: designer, craftsperson, artisan, etcetera. In the field of design or whatever creative sphere—this is where the individual is contextualized. The interpellation of craft is the call for the able-bodied person.

Performativity in theory

In pre-platonic Archaic Greece *mimesis* was the word to describe a bodily practice in teaching children dancing and singing and other behaviours from the example of more experienced

bodies. Craft skills were thus appreciated and have since then often been seen as crucial component of a capable human.

The mimetic reaction to a human body is primary and exemplary in a way that is infectious: it inspires and tempts imitation. /.../ the corresponding reaction even in our sensuous and associative responses to the qualities of physical objects, their expressions of formal composition and proportion, colour and material qualities of different kinds and the images and recollections which these objects may arouse within us and create the prerequisites for. (Weimarck 2010, p. 258)

Art Historian Torsten Weimarck discusses the mimetic reaction as a tool in understanding design objects and their interrelatedness to (his) human body. The extended implications however lie in interpersonal mimicking of a physical behaviour and movements of other bodies where imitation constitutes “an elementary corporeal mirroring and sensuous echoing response to the expressions of another body.” (Weimarck, 2010, p. 258).

The mirroring of the bodily styles of others is part of a learning process, and of becoming part of a society. Human beings may learn to do some things before learning to pronounce them, but in theories on “performativity”, words come first. In mapping the use of the concept of performativity, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick digs into its queer genealogy (1993). The notion of performativity has its root in philosophy, as practiced by f. ex. Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, as a critical development of J. L. Austin’s speech act theory from 1955. While the notion of words *as* actions was of initial interest, the relationship between saying and doing is now the centre of attention. Although not focusing on the actual making craft, Butler’s theories on gender concerned with “doing” rather than “being” seem useful as to look at craft from a critical perspective on what is *being done*. In introducing her concept of gender performativity, Butler proposes that gender is to be understood neither as an entity nor as a set of free-floating attributes, but instead, as continuously being done. In her seminal text *Gender Trouble* from 1990 she writes “gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity to be conceived /.../ as an incessant and repeated action of some sort”. (Butler, 1999, p. 112). In her following works, she continues to examine the relation between gender and performativity. It may be concerning the materialization of sexed bodies (1993) or more specifically on speech act theory (1997). She states that it is not enough to successfully carry out the intentions of an action for it to be recognized as such. The action must also echo prior statements and accumulate their force of authority.

In the field of design Attfield expects the concept of performativity, as utilized by feminist theoreticians, to bring about change also in practice. New multiple gender identities that are not necessarily already anticipated in line with the preconceived notions of designer’s sex, prerequisites innovation in both the theory and practice of design (Attfield, 2003). But can she hope for support when she calls for agency from the part of women in design history? In an often-cited article from 2003, Karen Barad clearly states that agency “cannot be designated as an attribute of ‘subjects’ or ‘objects’ (as they do not preexist as such).” She brings, in my opinion, the question closer to the field of craft when she says: “Agency is not an attribute whatsoever—it is ‘doing’/’being’ in its intra-activity”. (Barad 2003, p. 827). Her call for action is a radical

triangulation of for example an artefact, the designer and the making. And as I see it, if this concept is taken into consideration, Barad would agree that the objectives meet her terms only if design history takes on the whole crafting aspect.

Karen Barad declares performativity to be omnipresent in not only in literary and theatre studies, but all the more in interdisciplinary *performance studies*. The term itself provokes or encourages questions as to whether or not “all performances are performative”. (Barad, 2003, p 827). I would argue that not only are all performances but all actions are performative, when repeated and seen as a pattern of styles of movements that constitutes or simply meet the preconceived notions of what is to be for example “a man”. This requires an understanding of performance as an activity that is framed, highlighted, displayed, and that, as an act, the performance presupposes an audience (Gradén, 2011). In feminist theory and practice the notion, as offered by Butler, of mimetic, socially constructed, stylized acts that appear as authentic expressions of biological sex through a process of constant repetition, is thought to be one of the more useful models (Harris, 1999; Moriel, 2005; Rosenberg 2012). This transposes the question of “essence” into a key that is all the more interesting to art and performance studies. What I mean to say is: Not only is gender being performed but so is the designer role. The essential craftsman just doesn’t exist – he or she is recognized by action.

Crafting Design History

Craft and art have a common history and it may be stated that design, through its practical usefulness and social aspects, to a greater extent than the visual arts represent a contemporary aesthetical interface (c.f. Weimarck, 2003). The Art Historical canon, however, tends to voice the male genius of fine art as a norm. This practice is excluding—among others—the female artist and the craftsperson that are in turn referred to the position of the inferior or simply the other. Some art historical studies on the subject of craft, on the other hand, discuss precisely the associations to the applied; to the home; the feminine; the amateur—and other concepts related to the private as opposed to the public domain—as a means of critically re-evaluating art and art history in general (cf. Sparke, 1995; Harrod, 2002; Veiteberg, 2005; Rosenqvist, 2008).

In one attempt to fuse the objects and subjects of design history, Linda Sandino, in a special issue of the *Journal of Design History*, presents some critical turns such as the consumer aspect. But most importantly she also introduces Oral Histories—sometimes around a shared visual material—as a model to join forces of theory, practice and lived experience (Sandino, 2008). There is an obvious shift in the evaluation of design practices. In *Thinking Through Craft* (2007) Glenn Adamson is letting knowledge of the actual act of making expand the understanding what can be said about a piece. He is exemplifying with works of art, design and craft alike. The key word, or the least common denominator, in his examples as well as the ones I mention above, is the bodily experiences. The shared experience of design at home or of actual making constitutes a model that adds one dimension to our understanding, while simultaneously deconstructing the Art Historical canon.

So what does Swedish design history look like? Different examples of what kind of images design history is subjecting its students to can be found going through two of the books recently used for teaching design history at my university, looking for the interpellation of the able-bodied-craftsperson.

In Hedvig Hedqvist's *1900-2002 Svensk Form Internationell design* (2002), there are no designers depicted getting their hands dirty. There is in fact only one hand visible in all the illustrations, one hand, pointing right at me. It is a photo of a red, white, and black Pop Art poster from the Modern Museum of Art in Stockholm, wanting me as a visitor, a spectator rather than a manufacturer. All in all Hedqvist's history of design comes across as more of a history of ideas than reflecting the making. A lot of designers are mentioned by name, some of their work is shown but none of them is pictured working. Some black and white small pictures of furniture being assembled are the closest we get. At some points in history—for example in the 1960s and 70s—the question of whose hand is making the design is clearly an important factor. But this is a written history, in debates and protocols, without much aesthetic or practical implication for the profession during the time span covered by Hedqvist. More important in her account, as she reflects upon what has been important in 20th century design, are the international exhibitions, competitions and department stores. A pivotal example of how the production is executed is the designer, whose idea is so elegantly simple that he can just make one phone call to have his bookshelf made. This is design conveyed by word. The mind, the thought, the intellectual craft is the designer's practice while the production of the artefact is in the able hands of somebody else.

In Lasse Brunnström's *Swedish Design History* (2010) there are a dozen pictures showing the production of design. Brunnström observes and recognises the material cultural history outside the established canon. Production is present in his account, even in pictures—like for example in the case of the pictures of women in textile factories and men building cars—but anonymous. There are even some well-known male designers—presented with name and trade—actually being portrayed in action. However, the focus on process and production when introducing the new generation in design and craft from the 1990s is again discussed in text rather than illustrated with pictures. “Critical making”, engaged in social and political aspects of aesthetic issues, represents an important part of this era. The design group Front is being presented as one of the exponents. They are introduced with both names and a picture. In the picture they are performing a stylized act of making. *Sketch Furniture* was a project by Front in which the ideas of furniture were sketched in thin air, monitored, captured and conveyed into digital data that were in turn manifested as objects, plotted out in a 3D-printer. The process as presented is not only a statement that both reinstated and discussed the work of the designer's own hand, but it is also a new kind of practical research in the craft of sketching.

These historical accounts provide the students with a sense of interchangeability, or that different ideologies call for different actions. To look for the future design history we might need a wider scope. Lately a variety of university disciplines have been engaged with issues of crafting (cf. a brief research overview on “crafting knowledge” in Palmsköld & Rosenqvist, 2011). Even if the explicit aim is not to rewrite design history then at least this is partially the effect. This is to a

certain extent due to the multidisciplinary approach in different subjects such as economics, art history, and ethnology. And just to name one example in one other area: In a phenomenologically informed thesis in pedagogy, Helen Knutes explores what meaning is being made in the relation of craftsperson and the material. The body and making are studied in pedagogical conditions where good practice meet lacking experience or “incorporated references”, influences experiences of failure and uncertainty. Craft knowledge, in the end, she states, comes from personal relationship with material, techniques engaged by a craftsperson – “someone who has put time and effort into creating”. (Knutes 2009, p. 186).

Maybe the most interesting proposals to the writing of new design history in Sweden come from practice based thesis projects at universities or art colleges. Through craft Andreas Nobel is re-examining the hierarchical division between technical and textual knowledge and Frida Hällander investigates the conceptual boundaries of ceramic craft through critical practice to name a few (cf. Nobel, 2011; Hällander, 2011; Goldsmith, 2011; Laurien 2012). Another example is Otto von Busch who began a fruitful search for analogous or metaphorical stories (such as *hacktivism*) to sustain his theories for the world of *engaged fashion* —where a number of models of shared practice also sets out to contribute to a more sustainable society (von Busch, 2008).

To provide students with examples of good practice might be the most important part of teaching design history. Design students choices of specialization tend so be influenced by the practice of role models (Gislén & Harvard, 2007). Linda Fagerström, who made a study of gender aspects of design education, shows that although there are more women than men in design education by 2007 the critical gender perspective is something that the students have had to personally engage in to make a change (Fagerström, 2010). It is worth noting that the designers interviewed do trust in design and in themselves to be able to make a difference. What kind of role models surrounded them to make them believing in their abilities?

Visual representations of crafting

In design magazines designers are featured as a token of appreciation, of sharing and contributing to the ideologies of the publishers. Differences in as to whom the magazines are addressing their content may account for differences in the visual representations. For example, a handicraft magazine aimed for readers interested in Do-It-Yourself-aspects is likely to have considerably higher quantity of pedagogical illustration than other art, craft or design magazines (Rosenqvist, 2009).

In the ongoing research project ”Performative Handicraft. The Making of Gender in Artistic Practices”, the performative aspects of practical skills or hand-made aspects of the process of making are being studied. The main empirical material is the visual representations of the hands and bodies that make design, art or craft in magazines of different genres. While in the project the bodily styles and functional gestures are being subjected to a close reading, I will now take the

opportunity to point to some specifics as well as differences of the 1960s and the 2000s in three Swedish magazines *FORM*, *Hemslöjden* and *Paletten*.

[During the paper-presentation this section of the paper will be supplemented with an array of pictures to be discussed.]

FORM

FORM is now (since 2011) a specialized magazine for architecture and design. But earlier it has been covering a wide range of design issues, from handicraft to urban planning. It started out as newsletter for members of The Swedish Society of Arts and Design (Svenska Slöjdföreningen, founded in the 1854), but has been distributed to a wider audience from 1905, under its current name since 1932.

During the 1960s *FORM* featured more than 6 000 pictures, mainly photographic but also other kind of illustrations. Around 29 percent of them depicted human beings. 12 percent of these are representations of design being made. That is three percent of the total amount of the pictures. The categories of pictures of working designers contain documentary reports from studios of well-known designers but most often pictures from design schools or from presenting young award winning designers.

In the period from 2000 to 2010 *FORM* there are more than 9 600 photographic pictures and almost exclusively in colour. 34 percent of these are of human beings and of these 22 percent are caught in some kind of action. Less than one percent of the total amount of illustrations is showing the process of designing. But then there are exceptions, such as in *FORM* 2009#6 when members of the art and design group UglyCute are showing – in a series of pictures covering a full page, how to build a standard lamp from inexpensive materials. This series raises the ratio of active designers represented to 13 percent in that particular issue. Another exception is when the articles are featuring a traditionally particularly crafty Swedish region such as Dalarna, the pictures of design in action are also more frequent.

When comparing the decades it is obvious that the artist/designer at work was more frequent in *FORM* of the 1960s. But only one example from each decade features the actual process of making something with a fair chance of following the different stages in the making in order to do it yourself. The category of pictures of working designers is fairly equal in the case men and women being depicted. Most frequently depicted bodies in action are from other pedagogical situations, such as kids in school. These individuals are anonymous as are most of the pictures of making from faraway countries.

Hemslöjden (now *Hemslöjd*)

In 1933, Art Historian Gerda Boëthius founded the magazine *Hemslöjden* [eng. title: Home-craft]. It has since been a more or less official source of information for the handicraft movement in Sweden. Its aim has been to maintain and renew traditional folk art and craft with focus on small-

scale production, close to home and with natural materials. In the issues of the magazine *Hemslöjden* of the 1960s, there are more than 1 400 black and white images in them documenting objects and their making. In the 2000s this number has quadrupled. Over 4 800 illustrations ranging from graphic novels for a generation of young craftivists, to lavish displays of crafts objects in colour photographs and how-to-do-it-documentaries showing the process of making craft. The latter category is more common in the 2000s issues. Both decades show as high a number of action pictures. They represent 11 percent of the total amount of pictures in both the 1960s and in the 2000s. In the 1960s the pictures of human beings are 44 percent and in the 2000s its 38 percent. There is thus an increase in the percent rate of people being shown actually making craft in the 2000s. Compared to the design and art magazines there is more of sharing of tips and tricks of the traditional crafts in the handicraft magazine *Hemslöjden*.

Paletten

Paletten is an art magazine with a broad spectrum of reports from the art sphere, occasionally covering the crafts as well. It claims to be the oldest art magazine in Sweden, founded in Gothenburg 1940. *Paletten* include more than 1400 illustrations during the 2000s. 59 percent of them feature human beings, whereof four percent, or 35 pictures, are catching art in action. In total less than percent show art being made. Some of these are documentary photographs of performances. These numbers seem to be consistent over the years. In the 1960s there are many human beings being depicted in *Paletten* but only occasionally in the process of making.

The use of the theoretical notion of performativity in an art performance context raises some delicate issues actually being discussed in *Paletten*. These questions are concerning the agency of the individual subject. A voice of criticism is raised that performativity and performance are two incompatible models of thinking regarding the non-autonomous and non-subjective:

In one model you work with an outsider ideology (an art that is outside its market and museum system), while the other simply does not have any room for such an outside. For Butler is an act outside the conventions constitutive (and regulators) structure is not possible (von Hantelmann, 2008).

By analyzing performativity it might be possible to determine how art, craft or design respectively (re)produces conventions in its institutions. The model points to both possibilities and limitations of our actions. It highlights the social impacts rather than the individual actions of an artist who wants to stage an outsider position (cf. von Hantelmann, 2008). In my opinion, even if a position outside the norms is not possible, the question of how the limitations of our actions can be analyzed and used creates possibilities for crafting new designs for the future.

The statistical study of making in art, craft and design magazines show that there are more differences in the representations of craft between the different magazines than there are differences between decades, the most obvious exception of the significantly lower percentage of action-pictures in the design magazine of the later date.

Discursive limits and the question of naming

The discursive limits, of for example art and design, can be conceptualized by studying the making of the trade and the objects allowed to represent its genre. In this section of the paper I want to present the case of Handicraft in Sweden and focus on the naming—both of the genre and of its practitioners.

During the summer 2012 The National Association of Swedish Handicraft Societies (SHR) celebrated 100 years of existence with an extensive exhibition at Liljevalchs in Stockholm. For the last century the association has gathered most of the local and regional handicraft associations under the same national organizational umbrella. The engaged, actively crafting individuals have been many during these years and they still are. But how are their engagement displayed? Does their words, their artefacts, or their actions speak? Over 2000 works of craft were submitted to the exhibition the summer of 2012. They were all assembled as leaves on trees in the large installation in two of the main halls. In the surrounding rooms a plethora of objects were on display and in the third main hall the Do-It-Yourself-aspects were in focus. Several workspaces and organized workshops are challenging the visitor to make use of their hands, to do handicraft—or “sloyd”.

Not only their actions but also the names of the contributors were downplayed in the exhibition. What effect may that have for the writing of its history? What are the right words to use in the description of what is being made?

Craft- and handicraft organisations have played a great part in developing the Swedish style in design (Naylor 1990). Since the founding of the first national association for handicraft in Sweden (Föreningen för Svensk Hemslöjd) in 1899 by Lilli Zickerman; the before-mentioned National Association of Swedish Handicraft Societies in 1912; and then the magazine *Hemslöjden* in 1933, the handicraft movement in Sweden has been an important cultural institution organized as a social movement (cf. Palmköld, 2007; Meister et al, 2012). Since the end of the 19th century it has been part of the nationwide inventory of the traditions and products of the Swedish national cultural heritage. But the local Handicraft Societies emerging all over the country during the course of the 20th century were also offering women of various background and education creative workspaces as well as tools and means for creating new products from local traditional patterns. Besides the organizing of workplaces and retail stores, there was also an increasing demand for a platform that could provide exchange of knowledge about craft methods, techniques and cultural history (Svensson & Waldén et al, 2005).

In design history as well as at the exhibition mentioned above, the names of the people making the craft are hard to find. Several overlaying design histories have created a canon of often repeated facts, recurring products and people, exaggerating the homogeneity of Swedish design on the expense of for example the importance of handicraft. I have done previous studies that investigate the field of handicraft in relation to a wider field of design and craft, mapping out its interrelated outlines. In my thesis, the empirical studies focus the artistic creation in local Swedish handicraft organizations during the 1920s and the 1990s. One important result of the study

shows that as the number of men in the organization increased during the last part of the 20th century, as did the use of materials traditionally thought of as masculine, and focus was now on the making of “sloyd” instead of the emphasized connections to household production in the earlier used notion of “home-craft” (Rosenqvist, 2007). Among the findings is also the importance of the laws and ideologies working together to obscure the artists in the handicraft associations in the 1920s. First, from the Marriage Act of 1920 where every woman deprived the legal right to keep her maiden name, even if it was her artist-name. Second, there was the fact that that before Sweden ratified the Bern Convention in 1926 she was denied the right to sign her patterns and designs (Rosenqvist 2007, p. 67). And thirdly, on top of the legal aspects, handicraft is, time and time again, described as proto design brought in to modern society upheld by a handicraft persona: inventive yet rooted in tradition and uneducated with a “natural gift” or taught as a child (for a discussion on who counts as Swedish, see Hyltén-Cavallius, 2007).

So the Design Historian stands before a crossroads. On one hand there is the artists who were actually earning themselves individual and exceptional status among some of the most well known 20th century Swedish designers – such as for example Elsa Gullberg who was both an artist and the organizer of exhibitions and shows of The Swedish Society of Arts and Design (cf. Ahl & Ernkvist, 2008). On the other hand there is the organized Handicraft’s suppression of the individual maker. Seen from an historical point of view, neither strategy was successful in complying with the feminine ideal within the complementary gender structure of the cultural institutions (Svensson & Waldén, 2005). The emphasis of the anonymous and collective effort was however probably what made handicraft a viable example of humble craft(wo)manship and as such frequently exhibited at throughout the 20th century. Anonymous role models making craft in exhibitions might work as interpellators to do design. But in the historical narrative, the naming of an influential individual practice is considered common sense. In the process of making, however, it is of less importance who is doing what—as long as its well done, in more than one sense.

For the future

At the ISEA2011—a high tech art conference in Istanbul—the word “performance” was a shared concept oscillating between meanings referring to either an act on a more or less defined stage or the functioning of a technical device or operation. This is an anecdote that is telling for the challenges that lie ahead. It also harks back to the essentials of the performative act: Does it work?

Design is not just a noun, but also repeated actions (“Design is to design a design to produce a design” as stated by John Heskett, 2005). In this paper I have addressed the focus that has been on objects—on the expense of their production—and the focus that has been on the designers mind—on the expense of his or her bodily actions. I also propose that the discursive limits of a design can be conceptualized by studying its bodily styles.

I believe that a focus on the actual crafting, the performing of design, can challenge these limits. The subjects that a design history with a critical approach to norms and habits in design practice answers to, are the decisive factors that make a person believe she or he can be a designer, to make a difference to design and its history.

All the more important is that examples from design history can make the design student take a stance: What kinds of production modes are needed to make my design? What can expect I my fellow human to do? To think, emphatically, of the limitations of my body's abilities to produce the design, and the working conditions I place this body in, I think can rid design of its worst unsustainable production modes.

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