

Producing processes: an investigation into forming, framing and publishing

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Abstract

This project is an investigation into the process of producing spaces that frame, form and ultimately publish content. I have produced a set of flexible steel joints, which enable users to build up various structures and display spaces. My goal has been to study exhibiting through practical making, to show and explore possibilities of spatial thinking and experimenting within exhibition production. I have collaborated with five different designers and artists to further investigate the usage of the joints and the exhibition making process. With this project I have aimed to develop the notion of an exhibition not being a final product, but rather a continuous process, which embraces changing perspectives.

Keywords: design, exhibiting, process, structure

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Design Issue

Currently, most exhibitions are presented as finished products with little or no ability for further development. I argue that exhibiting and more specifically exhibition making has the potential to produce more knowledge when it is an open process, which enables new perspectives and ideas to be incorporated. With my project I wish to celebrate and investigate the potentiality of the working-process behind producing exhibition spaces. I have been investigating this issue by asking what value does work-process have in exhibition making?; what progress can a practical work-process bring?; and what value does the act of publishing bring to the work? I have been challenging the format of exhibitions by turning the unfinished process into a published exhibition, and experimenting with the role of the exhibition designer by also acting as a facilitator, curator and an assistant.

The project adds knowledge and information to the field of exhibition design by questioning the current situation and showcasing other possibilities of working with exhibition making and design. Another purpose of the project has been to act as a public platform for experimentation, to invite designers and artists to manifest their ways of working without having to produce a specific result.

Methods and Process

PRODUCING TOOLS

During the last year of my Master studies I have been focusing on exhibition design and open-ended design objects. I am interested in objects that are flexible, and make users think and act creatively. I have previously created a modular display-system, which allows the user to play with different set-ups, and decide themselves how the final object looks like and what function it holds (Fig 1., 2.). This project showed potential, and I wanted to explore those issues further in a bigger scale. I decided to keep exploring modular structures, because of the infinite possibilities modularity embodies.



Fig 1.



Fig 2.

The potentiality of such structures is also investigated by Celine Condorelli in *Support Structures* (2009), where she looks into different structures and the idea of support through examples, essays, photo documentations and her own wall-system for exhibiting. *Support Structures* has many parallels with my project – it investigates different flexible display structures; it collects, archives and manifests. At first I was interested in the project because of the physical manifestation – the wall-system, but

when reading the book further, it helped me to understand the meaning of my work and new ways of reflecting on it.

For my project, I tried to come up with the smallest, most flexible unit that would allow for maximum of different possibilities. I designed a steel joint (Fig 3.), which can be used for building a structure consisting of frames, walls and podiums. The joint allows the user to choose the material, the size and the colour of the structure and experiment with different set-ups, proportions and formats.

During this project I have used the same birch sticks, plywood and MDF boards for creating different set-ups (Fig 4.). In the beginning of the project I had planned to use a variety of materials and create multiple impressions, but I had to discard that idea because of limitations in time and capital.



Fig 3.



Fig 4.

PRODUCING PROCESSES

In order to investigate the usage of the created joints, I have collaborated with different artists and designers. My goal was to explore how different people work with this structure, how the structure could be used in various contexts, and how our

relationship affects the outcome. After some time it became clear that the most interesting and fruitful part of these collaborations was the working-process and our discourse, so that is what I chose to focus on, instead of the final results. Since I wanted different expressions to be displayed every time, I asked my collaborators to provide the content, which we together create a space for. The working-processes often took place in a public space, where the results afterwards were displayed.

My first invited collaborator was my classmate **Ibou Gueye**. Ibou was also in the middle of his degree project at that time, and had been publishing his process in the corridor next to our studio. I was intrigued by the idea of instant publishing and invited him to take it one step further with me. I suggested for us to produce an environment for communicating his process to people in another way. We produced the display-space together in an open corridor in front of passers-by (Fig 5.,6.). People were curious about what we were doing and approached us constantly. *It became clear that people are intrigued by the working-process and felt less intimidated to ask questions when we were working. When the display-space was finished and the work concluded people became more confined and less curious about the displayed work.*



Fig 5.



Fig 6.

My second collaborator was my classmate **Magnus Andersson**. Magnus was at a stage in his degree project where he was planning a public lecture-workshop and asked me, if I would be interested in joining it with my structure. Magnus and I had been following each other's projects for a while, and shared a lot of common ground. In his workshop the participants were asked to make a small fanzine and to display it on the

structure (Fig 7.). We had decided on how the participants should use the structure – we had prepared fishing lines and paperclips for hanging the fanzines, but already the first person started questioning those rules, and put the fanzine up in a different way. The participants tried to find alternative ways and places for hanging their works. Someone, for instance, put their work under the structure; someone used the metal joints to hang their work, instead of the beams. *I think this shows that the aesthetics and feel of the structure allows creative thinking and usage. The imperfection of the structure is what makes it so flexible, it makes the user feel like they are allowed to question it and test its limits.*



Fig 7.

My third collaborator was **Sandra Österling**. She is studying in the Masters programme in crafts in HDK. I was interested in her perspectives of exhibiting as a ceramic artist. Sandra suggested us to use her Bachelor degree project. She was interested in finding new ways of displaying and perceiving that project. We tried to question the way she has categorised her work, and try out different settings and backgrounds (Fig 8., 9., 10., p. 9). In the process we focused on creating new narratives and juxtapositions within her project. We discussed art, crafts and her works. I got to be a part of her work and understood it on a deeper level. In return, she found a way into her work again, got to untie the knots and to rediscover it. *We discussed our roles in this process, and found out that the working-process and the division of labour is very democratic. Sandra became very interested in configuring the structure and designing the space while I acted more as*

a curator, picking out part of her works, coming up with narratives and ideas about the concept.



Fig 8.



Fig 9.



Fig 10.

My fourth collaborator was my classmate **Kajsa Lannemyr**. I invited her to join, because I was interested in approaching the structure from a more visual perspective. Kajsa has been working with colours in her previous projects, and that is why I suggested us to make a colour display. Together we chose the colours, designed the set-up and built the structure on Avenyn in Gothenburg (Fig 11., p. 10). I learned from Ibus collaboration that the public working pays off, and people are more curious when the working-process is published. I wanted to investigate that idea further and test it on a

more public space. Passers-by were asking questions and were eager to talk about their own experiences with colours.



Fig 11.

My fifth and final collaborator in this project was **Jenny Simmar**. She is studying photography in Valand School of Fine Arts. I approached Jenny, because she is active as a performance artist and curator. Jenny works a lot with public space, and I hoped she would contribute something different to my project. We built the structure in front of Gothenburg Art Museum as a reference to working besides and outside of the institution. It became very obvious that she approached the structure as an artist, not as a designer. *We discarded all ideas of how the structure should be used, and built it up as freely as possible (Fig 12., 13., 14., 15., p. 11). Jenny helped me to see a new side of the structure, which instead of a functional and stable display space, could be artwork itself.*



Fig 12.



Fig 13.

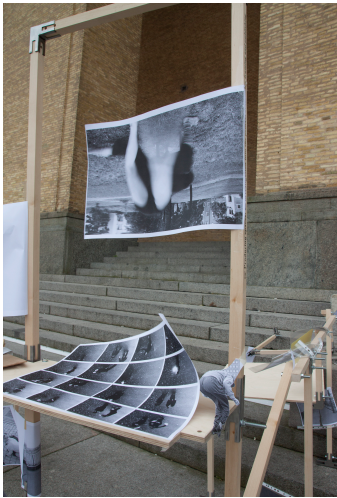


Fig 14.



Fig 15.

DOCUMENTATION AND COMMUNICATION OF THE PROCESSES

The created processes and structures have been documented and archived on a public platform at *producingspaces.tumblr.com*. I wanted an easily usable platform, which would allow me to publish the photos in a quick manner. *In later discussions, it has come up that a better way of communicating the processes might be through time-lapse videos or a transcription of the discussions, because those aspects might be more interesting than photos of the outcome.*

Result and Discussion

Condorelli (2009) writes: "This is not an offer, however, a complete guide or all-encompassing methodology for how to act and work together towards change. Far from it, the potential here might be for renewed vocabularies and possibilities for critically intervening in cultural and spatial environments, foregrounding relationships, and through this maybe find a way to stimulate the politics of our relationship to political, cultural, economical and spatial context." (p. 11)

My goal with this project was never to produce a perfect joint for a structure or to provide a new method for exhibition-making, but rather to bring forth new ways of thinking about exhibition making and to raise questions about the contemporary roles of designers. During the project it became clear that the most important issue is the working-process and how it has the potentiality of being more fruitful than any produced result.

WHEN PROCESS BECOMES FORM

The 17th issue of the magazine *Graphic When Design Becomes Attitude* (Kwangchul, 2011) focuses on the notion that "designers practice today is moving towards process-oriented works based on the designers autonomy and away from the conventional relationship between the client and the designer" (p. 4). The editorial refers to the curator Harald Szeeman and his exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* in Kunsthalle Bern in 1969, with which he brought a sudden turn to the art world by exhibiting the concepts and the attitudes of artists instead of the actual finished artworks. He was acting as an active partner to the artists, elevating the importance of artists' processes rather than their results. This issue of *Graphic* also introduced me to a group of designers (Luna Maurer, Edo Paulus, Jonathan Puckey, Roel Wouters) from Amsterdam, who work together on a project called *Conditional Design*. The purpose of *Conditional Design* is to treat process as the result, they have said: "Our work focuses on processes rather than products: things that adapt to their environment, emphasize change and show difference." (p. 30).

These examples encouraged me to treat the structure as process, and to discard the idea of producing finished exhibitions with it. I can see the produced object – the joint, as a manifestation of process, of making, of doing. The structure has its truest form when it is not an object yet, but when it is unfinished and still in the making, when it is being actively used and discovered by someone. The aesthetics of the steel joint reinforce this notion. The joint looks and feels rough and even aggressive, which in my opinion encourages the user to use it and not to be afraid to test its limits. My main purpose, when designing the joint was the usability, flexibility and functionality of it, not so much the specific materiality and aesthetics.

When using the joints, the primary focus lies in the working-process and experimentation. The structure does not ask for a tangible result, it asks for creative usage and an open mind. I see it as an open platform for experimenting and expressing. It encourages designers/artists to bring forth their different processes, to manifest their ways of working. In return the structure provides the opportunity for a relationship, a conversation between people and objects. What is produced in the end of these experiments is much more than a display; it is knowledge, compromises and friendships.

PERFORMATIVE MAKING

The building of the display often takes place in a public place, which turns the work process into a kind of a performance and the unfinished structure into an exhibition. An exhibition in motion – constantly changing, constantly displayed. The exhibition making becomes an improvised choreographic performance, which is honest and unillustrated, not shadowed by pretension and assigned roles. The exhibition in motion celebrates changing perspectives and embraces reconfiguration. The idea is to display what happens between the makers and the structure, as a part of the exhibition. It stops being simply execution, because the makers/performers introduce their creativeness to the process, and alter the outcome by allowing other aspects to come to the fore.

The notion of "doing=performing" is also investigated by Yvonne Rainer (Maar, 2013), who in various projects the 1960s - 1970s looked into how “dance should be instilled with a “neutral” quality that is inspired, among other things, by everyday movements.” (p. 88). In her *Continuous Project – Altered Daily* from 1970, objects like

mattresses, sticks and large cardboard boxes, served to generate movement sequences that emerged while the objects were being handled. Through the objects, working processes were brought onto the stage and aspects of everyday life were incorporated into the performance. She was interested in the unforeseeable and unexpected things that happen when arranging objects in space. “Acting and thinking are positioned side by side, in equivalence, and are understood in a dynamic relationship.” (Maar, 2013, p. 89).

NEW PERSPECTIVES

Active usage of the structure produces a lot of tacit, intuitional knowledge about the object itself, the work published on it and the act of exhibiting. Working in close proximity with the tool – setting it up, testing its limits – allows new ways of seeing to arise.

For instance, the structure forces the user to step out of their comfort zone. In Rainers *Continuous Project – Altered Daily* (Maar, 2013), she was constantly in charge of her own movements; she was both the choreographer and the dancer. In the case of working with the structure, however, the power-relationship is more complex. In the beginning of the process, the user seems to be in total control, deciding which joints connect to which boards and beams. As the structure grows, limitations appear and the structure takes over as the choreographer. All of a sudden, the user has to adapt to what is possible to do, rather than what they want to do. Throughout the process there is a constant struggle between who is the designer – the user or the structure. I believe this struggle to be one of the most fruitful aspects of working with the joints and the structure; it forces the user to let go of the control, to rethink their decisions and ways working.

Another way the structure triggers learning and new perspectives is by providing the possibility of a democratic relationship between the different users. Working practically together makes a relaxed and meaningful discussion possible. Configuring and assembling the structure has proved to be a very intimate situation, which triggers active conversation between counterparts.

Working in public has shown that for passers-by, a work-in-progress is less intimidating and more inviting than a finished exhibition space. People are more likely to walk up to the makers, and ask about the work and what they are doing. Publishing the

working-process gives the designers and passers-by the possibility of having a mutually rewarding conversation, without proposing fixed answers to questions or giving judgements. The users of the structure are then able to incorporate the new perspectives and ideas to their work and space-making process.

ROLE OF THE DESIGNER

This project has enabled me to perform multiple roles in the field of design and to look into the dynamics of these different situations. I have performed two main roles during the project. My first role resembled a more traditional product designer – designing a flexible and sturdy joint, and producing it in the metal workshop. Looking back, it seems that at that stage I was relying on my gut feeling, guessing that this could turn out to be something interesting, without understanding the true potential of the project. I was focused on the functionality and aiming to make a structure, which would hopefully open up endless possibilities.

Only when I stopped being the producer of the joint, and became the user of the structure, the opportunities and true value of it became clear. At this stage of the project I was focusing on finding collaborators, organizing exhibitions/happenings, communicating the project and exploring the structures possibilities. I was acting more as a curator or an exhibition producer, and initiator-organizer than a designer. However, it is clear that the role of the designer is shifting to a more open-discipline, away from the goal-oriented practice to a more process based one, which requires different skills than only the form-language.

MANIFESTO

As a summary of the previously mentioned collaborations, I created a manifesto to frame and to explain the purpose of the project and how the joints should be used (Fig 16., 17., p. 17). The manifesto functions as a manual and consists of guidelines to make the working-process as fruitful as possible.

I was inspired by Condorellis *Support Structures* manifesto (2009) and the *Conditional Design Manifesto* (Kwangchul, 2011). In *Support Structures*, the last clause states: "Support Structure generates an impulse to change through reconsideration and

adjustment of space both physically and conceptually." (p. 58) and the *Conditional Design Manifesto* states: "The process is the product. The most important aspects of a process are time, relationship and change. The process produces formations rather than forms." (p. 30). These were interesting additions to my ideas and also pinpointed one of the primary aims of my project – to allow and encourage reinvention and changing perspectives.

The created manifesto includes a short introduction to the project and a set of rules, which should be followed when working with the joints. The rules are as follows:

1. Initiate – *start something new.*
2. Display anything, everything – *do not be intimidated by the idea of an exhibition.*
3. Collaborate and incorporate multiple voices – *ask others to join; take different points of view into consideration.*
4. Experiment with ideas and execution – *be courageous and try out ideas.*
5. Produce an alternative process – *find a new way of working.*
6. Display the production of space, the production of knowledge – *experience has shown that new ideas may arise, when passers-by get involved in the process.*
7. Perform your making – *try to think of the working-process as a finished exhibition.*
8. Discuss, argue, agree – *encourage people to have and share their opinions actively.*
9. Question your role, change your perspective – *let go of control and be flexible with the division of labour.*
10. Question your decisions and reassess – *allow reconsideration and a change of heart.*
11. Question the framework and step outside of it – *incorporate elements from the outside; use the joints in ways they should not be used.*
12. Progress – *let go of striving towards a finished result.*
13. Keep one end always loose and untied – *stay open for change and allow the structure to be in motion.*
14. Do not strive for perfection – *this will make the mind more open and*

experimental.

15. Produce a relationship, a conversation and knowledge – *discussion, curiosity and an open mind can be the simplest way of learning new things.*

16. Be generous with what you have produced – *show it, talk about it, and reflect upon it; incorporate the knowledge to further work.*

17. Dismantle and start over – *keep the process in progress.*



Fig 16.



Fig 17.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

The most important issue in this project has been the working-process and how it could have the potentiality of being more fruitful than any produced result. The created joints encourage designers and artists to bring forth their different processes, and to manifest their ways of working. In return it provides an opportunity for a relationship, a conversation between people and objects. Configuring and assembling the structure has proved to be a very intimate situation, which triggers active conversation between counterparts and allows new ways of seeing, thinking, acting and learning to arise. Working in public spaces has shown that for passers-by, a work-in-progress is less intimidating and more inviting than a finished exhibition space. People are more likely to walk up to the makers and ask about the work and what they are doing, which gives the designers and the audience a possibility of having a mutually rewarding conversation.

Another issue this project reflects on is the role of designers. I argue that a new role of designers could be to provide users with ideas, processes and possibilities rather than coming up with fixed solutions with narrow functions. The joints and structure manifest and celebrate designers and artists working without having to produce marketable finished products.

References

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