

ÅBÅKE

åbåke: Patrick Lacey, Benjamin Reichen, Kajsa Ståhl, Maki Suzuki and Charlotte York

Location: London

Operative since: 2000

Practice organised as a: partnership

<http://abake.fr>

åbåke is a collective of four graphic designers whose work focuses on the social aspect of design and the strength that collaboration can bring to a design project. Their work includes posters, books, installations in art galleries and events that revolve around watching films, dancing, cooking, eating and teaching. Members of Åbåke co-founded Sexymachinery (magazine, 2000-2008), Kitsuné (record label, 2002), Dent-De-Leone (publishing house, 2009), Drawing Room Confession (journal 2011). They have taught at the RCA (2004-2010), Central St Martins (2005-on going), IUAV (2009) and HEAD (2012-on going).

What desires, values and elements of support/discouragement made your practice evolve over time?

Here's a story which is still puzzling us but could answer this question. We are fascinated by sushi chefs: the perfect combination of a fantastic job and the basic need to eat what is absolutely the best. From our understanding, there is a state of perfection linked to this job. Repetition of an acquired knowledge over and over again, strict discipline, learning from mistakes, stealing from the master to become one oneself, eventually, having suffered the nine hells in the process. We are fascinated and seek to work with many people whose jobs are similar to the sushi chef. However, we would hate to always work in the same way. Ideally, each project would be new and we would be allowed to learn from scratch, make all the mistakes. The paradox with such a method is that we cannot learn from those mistakes. The progress is incredibly slow, if there even can be a form of progress. The reality is that we do have aspects of projects which can be used in the future—designing a book or performing in front of an audience—but the attitude is in principle one of rejection of building up.

What, in your case, are the advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses of working collectively?

We looked at it from two angles: the positive attitude of friendship, a will to spend more time together intellectually and also intimately - as there is a couple in our collective - but also sharing financial precarity, opposing fear. We also looked at it from what problems bands might face, namely financial (in)equality and solo album syndrome. Our first decision was to have one email address, one bank account, one invoicing system, one name. This last one is difficult to maintain against external pressure. We ALWAYS have to fight to not have individual names written next, in brackets, etc. in interviews or workshops, as the idea that people who are not physically present can be credited seem alien to journalists and communication offices. After 14 years of collaborations between the 4 founders, the methods are still similar but we are growing the number of outside collaborators. It seemed that only working within the four of us was leading to implosion. Today, we keep the structures but we are pretty much independent, with occasional collective work between two of us. It took a while, after having become very similar, that another way was to become different again. You like drawing, fine, you like performing, fine too, education is not your thing, ok. We do what we want to do with the blessing of the others who are free not to do it.

åbåke

interviews

How do you deal with money and wages between the components of your group?

How do you deal with tensions and power relations within your group?

Wages: all invoices are from the collective and go to one bank account. It doesn't matter who worked on what, it goes in the pot. We have been earning £1000 per month each for the last ten years but the partnership pays for the studio, taxes, work-related expenses. In terms of the tensions and power relations, we are quite cool about it. The two French of the collective learned a great deal of Scandinavian and Welsh ways. We almost never have confrontations but this is also because we now work quite individually. To my memory, we have never felt the need to vote.

How do you access meaningful commissioned work and how do you finance and carve-out time for self-initiated projects? What strategies and tactics are you making use of?

A question back at you, prompted by the use of "access". We agree some commissions are inherently more interesting but what about changing the OK ones to great by the sheer response and development with the commissioner? Too many designers "just" answer the brief and we believe it is mainly because of apathy from our fellow designers that interesting graphic design is so marginal. Why is mediocrity the standard from which we have to start? For a very long time, we said 'yes' to anything and – except for two or three bad cases - we were always able to turn anything into something meaningful for us without pulling the whole cover and leaving the commissioner in a naked state of a hostage. One friend told us, however, that we had a tendency to make people dance even when they did not need or want to. A cute, yet sharp, criticism. Later, our attitude attracted people. From a place of service (graphic design), some artists, curators or others reacted to our way of working within the remit of the commission by inviting us again in a more autonomous process. We are residency addicts. We don't really like the notion of the self-initiated or even the idea of carving out. Another friend recently told us how, in the States, the dichotomy between food-work and self-initiated work was as extreme as one paying for the luxury of the other. We don't want this for ourselves.

Another detail is the fact we are graphic designers but also artists (not as a self-stamped badge, but this is how we are invited when art institutions decide to call us anything - perhaps because it legitimises the invitation for funding?), which means we also tap into the financial resources usually restricted to artists, such as grants, bursaries, residencies, exhibition production budgets.

How do you organise your time between work and non-work? What systems do you use to keep track of where you invest your time?

We used to keep weekends for non-work. Today, everyday is work but any day can be off work too. We don't keep track as the possible prospect of finding out one is paid less than 1p/hour could be depressing.

How does your current working and living environment (geographic location, spatial arrangement) reflect (or otherwise) the ethos, methods and dynamics of your practice?

I have been living in the suburbs of Paris since February and to mid-June this year. During this time, I have travelled to seven countries, worked on trains, planes, in cafés, anywhere with or without an internet connection. I have only seen my girlfriend and daughter every two weeks for one or two days max. This is probably the most extreme the work/life environment can be stretched for me. The others have different conditions. On a practical level, my need to work on so many projects concurrently come from the sad reality that interesting projects pay less than boring ones.

Please draw a diagram of all the elements and structures that support your design practice (monetary & non-monetary resources, people, spaces and institutions, family, other assets, ...) Can you note how these elements support you and the flows of exchange related to them? Can you also include elements that “threaten” your practice?

Not sure why a diagram is necessary. Here is a list:

We support our practice financially by never working for free unless it comes entirely from us, but even this part of our work is supported by artistic structures like exhibitions and residencies. We are selling parts of a project started 13 years ago and which has since become financially OK, but is now boring for us to participate in. The selling will take another three years. An attitude towards charging money. Yes, it is difficult and yes, everybody shies away from the dirty money, but invoicing is not a crime.