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Anatomy of a Collaboration:

An Insider's View of the Rørpost Project

BY RENATA LUCIA

WHEN DONNA E. PERKINS AND SUE REEVES would meet at their Art Square Studios on Main in 2010, they could not imagine their connection would spark 42 members of two artist collectives to embark on an international collaboration in 2015. And yet, the Rørpost Collaboration Project is coming to fruition in a series of four artist-organized exhibitions, providing an extended meditation on the power of networks, experimentation, and artists' agency. Following two exhibitions in Esbjerg, Denmark, **84 artworks will open at the Art Car Museum on September 10th, with select works at Houston's City Hall December 5th.**

The project was conceived in Esbjerg, Denmark by members of a large, annual exhibition group, "Blå Døre." Following her 2014 relocation from Houston to Esbjerg, Reeves met members Flemming Rendbo and Jette Dümke. Dümke later broached the possibility of an international collaboration. "She and I discussed the idea of a pipeline of artistic energy," said Reeves. "The energy industry is moving forward in Esbjerg, and we were thinking that energy could extend beyond fossil fuels and wind

power to art." Her thoughts turned back to Houston and to Perkins. "On a visit back to Houston, Sue asked me if that artists' group I was in might be interested in a collaboration project with a group of artists in Denmark," said Perkins. "I said 'Sure' without hesitation." Perkins is a facile collaborator, which made her particularly receptive, and a member of Art Chatter, which she volunteered for the Rørpost project. Comprised of a diverse group of artists, Art Chatter provides a supportive community for critical dialogue. Although founded as a critique group in 2004 by former Glassell classmates Tami Merrick and Lynne Rutzky, the group has also shown together multiple times in Houston and Marfa.

With input from member (and Executive Director of the Texan-French Alliance for the Arts) Karine Parker-Lemoyne, Perkins proposed a paper exchange format for the Rørpost project. Meeting shortly after the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks, the two also proposed "freedom of expression" as a theme. Regular Skype planning meetings continued amongst Perkins, myself, Reeves, Rendbo, and Rich. Dethlefsen. The Danish contingent





The Rørpost's show in Denmark at Esbjerg City Hall. *Photography by Flemming Rendbo*

did not wish to pursue the political angle, but agreed that each artist should start a work on paper to be finished by a partner across the Atlantic.

Danish meeting notes stated the intent of "making primal connections through art and returning to childlike impulses" while relying on "curiosity, empathy, and compassion." Since the idea for the project originated in Denmark, both groups also agreed to use Rørpost as the project title, referencing the Danish verb "to touch" and pneumatic tubes used to exchange messages.

But, as someone noted in my Ello feed, "...co-producing with a person you have never met feels high risk. It is difficult enough with somebody whom you trust, and the international distance makes for a long bridge to cross." To open members to this unique experience, I coordinated a similar collaboration experiment within Art Chatter. As our members reviewed the surprising results of letting someone else augment their pieces, the Rørpost project gained full support within Art Chatter. Organizers paired artists via Skype, blindly drawing names from

a Houston cowboy hat, and a Danish Viking helmet: With the pairings set, the artists were given about a month to initiate a work, which then traveled to their partner for completion.

Participating artists included: **Becky Soria** & Marianne Skjølstrup, **Damon Thomas** & Johny Wilslew, **Carol McKee** & Alf Pedersen, **Kay Kemp** & Tina Asmussen, **Donna E. Perkins** & Astrid Hygum, **Lisa Marie Hunter** & Connie Borgen, **Nicola Parente** & Lars Henning Andersen, **Tami Merrick** & Flemming Rendbo, **Brenda Bunten Schloesser** & Jette Dümke, **Jan Jbeili** & Jytte Jespersen, **Renata Lucia** & Erik Brøndberg, **Raymond Saucillo** & Per Lenholdt, **Andis Applewhite** & Lene Hassig Vilslev, **Jennifer Madeley Dunn** & Birgit Juhl, **Kay Sarver** & Niels Kongsbak, **Joe Aker** & Gustav Iwinski, **Barbara Tennant** & Rich Dethlefsen, **Karine Parker Lemoyne** & Lotte Lambæk, **John Bernhard** & Gitte Hadrup, **Tracey Meyer** & Sue Reeves, **Trudy Askew** & Søren Mørns.

While documenting progress on the project website, I noted the variety of ways artists tackled the problem of creating a work

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someone else would finish. Strategies included leaving half of the piece blank, leaving small voids, working only in pencil and without color, or working over the entire piece, so that the partner had to make all final decisions. Google translate was used to bridge the language barrier; some teams communicated frequently on strategies and progress via emails and social media, while others had minimal communication.

Predictably, collaboration results were mixed; some works were almost inscrutable to their recipients, and differing media, content, and contexts collided. Artists from both groups professed discomfort, yet the pairings often pushed artists with a buoyant energy, and pulled some outside of their normal media. All 42 collaborations were completed and successful by virtue of acquired experience. Following this, each artist created a solo work in the medium of their choice as a response to the experience.

During this time, the Houston team tackled a huge obstacle: finding a large exhibition space without completed works or

time to enter normal proposal cycles. Surprised by our delay, the Danes had already secured two exhibition venues by the end of 2015. I created a temporary portfolio website solely for venue proposals, and Merrick joined the organizers to lead our venue search. A dynamo, Merrick secured the Art Car Museum and City Hall venues, a catalog introduction from Mayor Sylvester Turner, and a City's Initiative Grant. She and John Bernhard acquired the project's first sponsorship from the Danish Consulate, via Consul Anna Thomsen Holliday, whose support kick-started funding and grant writing.

Arguably the most impressive Art Chatter outcome, various artists stepped up repeatedly for leadership, vision, networking, fundraising, publishing, design, events, and photography. The group even changed names during the process, from Art Chatter Critique Group to Art Chatter Collective. **“Rørpost is no longer about critiques,”** said Merrick. **“It is about community and collectively working together.”**

The collaboration, and possibly our meeting model, also influenced Blå Døre. **“The Blå Døre has changed in the direction of more dialogue with each other.”** said Rendbo. **“The challenges of exchange and collaboration have brought some out of their comfort-zone and some into new areas of creativity and social interaction.** All the participating artists have expressed enthusiasm and joy about the initiative and the process so far, and are looking forward to the continuing story.”

The Danish artists have already initiated a new Esbjerg/Halifax collaboration, and Art Chatter will consider future collaborations after returning to their normal critique schedule. The Houston/Esbjerg Collaboration will be on view in Houston at the Art Car Museum and Houston's City Hall made possible in part through the City's Initiative Grant. *For more information on the Rørpost Collaboration Project, including exhibition details and a complete sponsor list, visit www.artcollaboration.org.*

Shown from left to right: Eric Brøndberg, Flemming Rendbo, and Rich. Dethlefsen; The Danish organizers transport works on paper for shipment to Houston. *Photography by Jette Mortensen.* ❖ Eric Brøndberg opens Houston works on paper shipped to Denmark. *Photography by Rich. Dethlefsen.* ❖ Karine Parker-Leymone, Tami Merrick, Renata Lucia, Donna E. Perkins; Danish works on paper received in Houston. *Photography by Kay Sarver*

