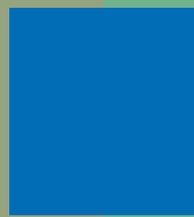
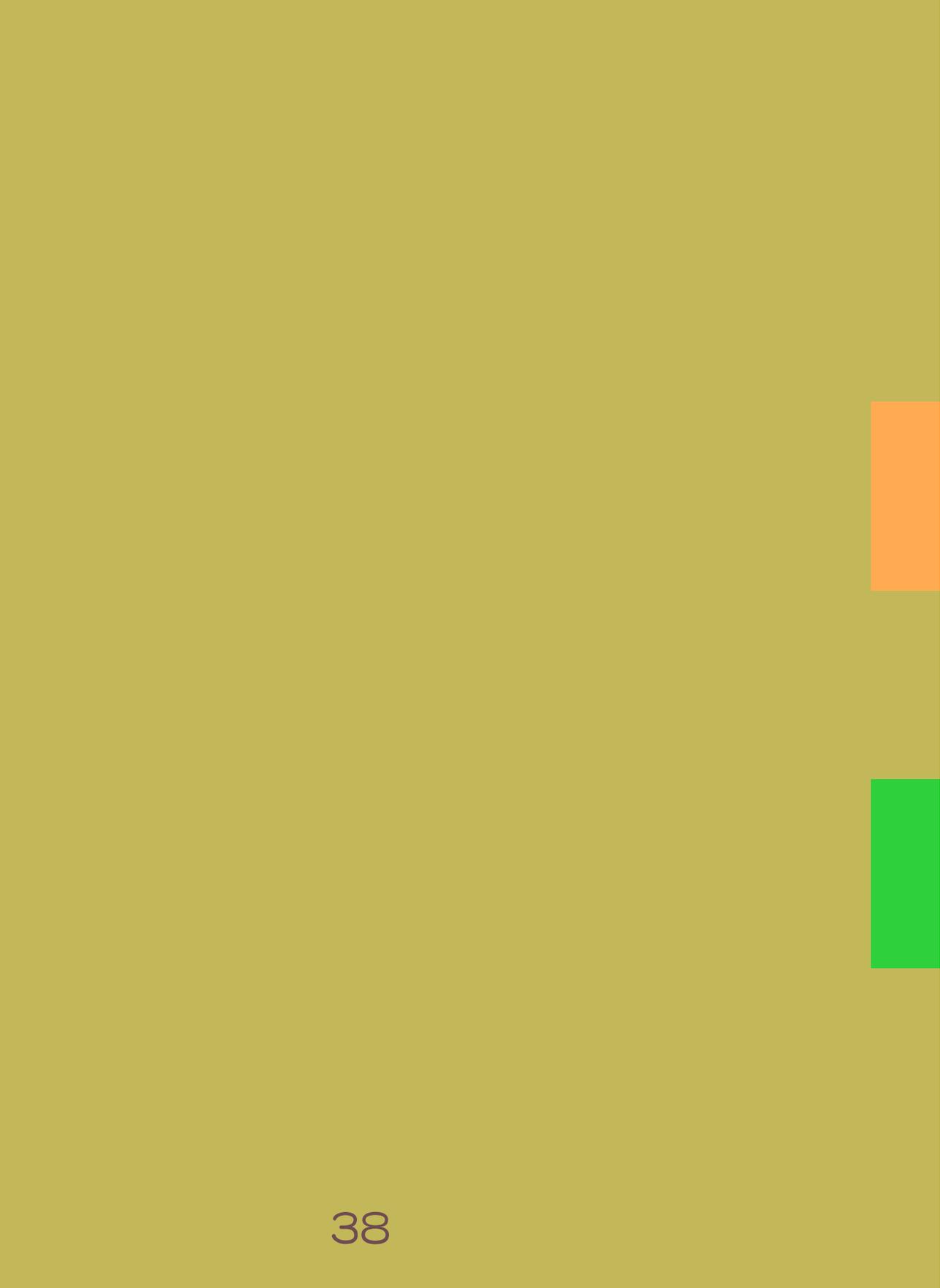


TOWARDS A CRITICAL  
COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

ANJA GROTEN





The notion of collaboration has been running through the Sandberg design department from the moment I first encountered it as a student back in 2009. Fed up with isolated, individualistic approaches to design, I came to the Sandberg with the desire to finally spend time with other designers in solidarity. I wanted to make work *together*, form collectives, develop a meaningful collaborative design practice, producing work that acknowledges and is accountable for its part-taking in (re)producing socio-political reality. The design department, I envisioned, would be a test site that would allow me to find design accomplices and build coalitions.

Caption here lorem  
ipsum dolor sit  
amet



Considering the collaborative dimensions of pedagogy, it is worth paying attention to the modes in which collaboration operates, how it is recognized and practiced—what its practical implications are. The encounters of a design student with the multitude of *different* talented designers, from diverse cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, in a rather intense environment<sup>1</sup> might bring about common ground, shared urgency, and solidarity. However, even more so, students will encounter differences, contingency, tensions, and possibly friction. Regardless of whether they embrace or avoid opportunities for collaboration, the notion of a collaborative approach to design as one of harmony and togetherness will surely become troubled at the design department.

This text aims to problematize the notion of collaboration—in the context of design, design education. Specifically, it looks at the ways in which the Sandberg design department contributes to undoing the fetish of collaboration, which I have to admit drove me to come to the Sandberg in the first place. This is not to abolish the notion of collaborative design practice—but to acknowledge that collaboration is not a choice. Collaboration as a condition acting and reacting at all times, and inhabiting power relations. The question is: what constitutes collaboration? What are the implications of collaborating, and how can design education reflect on and negotiate the dynamics inherent in collaboration, in (self)conscious ways?

1. The educational environment that I describe is perceived as intensive in the sense that it is limited to two years and that a lot is at stake. Besides investing two years to go back to studying, students, many of which have moved to the Netherlands from abroad, face sometimes confronting cultural changes, and challenging housing and financial situations.

## ACTS OF POSITIONING

Considering the practical matters that come about in explicit forms of collaboration, interaction within collaborative settings is oftentimes oriented toward achieving consensus. However, according to Mahmoud Keshavarz and Ramia Mazé design can also be understood ‘as a form of intervention in which a particular social order may be confronted with others’.<sup>2</sup> Keshavarz and Mazé, along with other design theorists engaging with adversarial forms of design practice,<sup>3</sup> inquire whether collaborative approaches to design can accommodate the different identities and subjectivities of participants. Consensus, here is seen ‘merely as a temporary result of a provisional hierarchy, a stabilization of power, which always and inevitably entails some form of exclusion’.<sup>4</sup>

If we look at collaborative initiatives coming out of the design department, we can find formations on the grounds of commonalities. At the same time, there seems to be a recurring urgency to mark out *distinctive* positions and approaches to how things are done. The self-organized student initiative PUB<sup>5</sup> is an example of an inter-departmental student collective that emerged at the interstices of the institution. A student from the design department, Daniel Seemayer, was looking for more fundamental exchanges between students of different departments, and a stronger focus on and investment in matters of (self-)publishing. Instead of regretting the lacking facilitation of such encounters at the institute, Daniel engaged in acts of positioning, carving out a new and explicit position towards design and the educational construction he was embedded in and questioned underlying structures, without disregarding them. From informal occasional extra-curricular meetings PUB grew

2. Mahmoud Keshavarz and Ramia Mazé, ‘Design and Dissensus: Framing and Staging Participation in Design Research’, *Design Philosophy Papers* 11, no.1 (2013).
3. Other design researchers discussing agonism in relation to design are Carl DiSalvo (‘Community and Conflict’, in *Community and Culture* (2011), *Adversarial Design* [Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2012]), and Tad Hirsch (‘Contestational Design: Innovation for Political Activism’, PhD thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008). Both build on theories of agonism as proposed by political theorist Chantal Mouffe. Agonism, according to Mouffe, stands for a pluralist democratic order in which the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated.
4. Ibid.
5. PUB calls itself a ‘trans-departmental initiative funded and run by students of the Sandberg Instituut. Establishing a publishing practice at the University, PUB functions as a hub and a platform to identify interdisciplinary connections and accelerate collaborations among students, alumni, and third parties. PUB’s channels include radio, TV, PUBcast, website, Type Lab, Journal, and publishing sessions.’ <https://pub.sandberg.nl/>.

into a persisting collective of rotating student groups. PUB members study at different departments but share an interest in engaging with, and challenging modes of ‘making public’. While being embedded within the institutional environment of the Sandberg Instituut, PUB has insisted on remaining independent to a certain degree and negotiated the necessary space to do so. The students decide what projects and activities they want to get involved with. PUB sets clear boundaries with regard to how much they want to be involved in the regular curric-



Caption here lorem ipsum dolor sit amet

ulum. Although the initial group who started PUB has since graduated and the collective has undergone multiple transitions, the initiative continues. Due to the openness of the structure, PUB transforms into various shapes. PUB safeguards and respects the effort and work that previous members have put into it, while leaving open possibilities to question its very structure at all times. There is not one mission statement, manifesto or code of conduct. There are PUB workshops,

the PUB journal, PUB radio broadcasts, PUB printing services and the constantly changing PUB website. PUB does not rely on an agreed upon understanding of publishing and is therefore able to continuously iterate on itself, and its position inside an institutional context.

## THE POLITICS OF INFORMALITY

The exchanges with the students who engage with PUB have been of great importance to my own classes, in which I aim to engage the students in discussion about the various modes of collaboration. Drawing on Derrida’s *Politics of Friendship*, the notion of a ‘designer host’ became quite relevant. Initiatives such as PUB but also Quicksand,<sup>6</sup> a student organized lecture series, show that students take the liberty to create self-organized spaces for encounters and exchange amongst peers—in and outside of the classroom. These hosting initiatives bring about important challenges in thinking about design practice. For instance: if I organize, coordinate, write emails, handle budgets, am I still designing? Although organizing and hosting an event may not immediately meet our expectation of what design practice looks like I see the development of such activities as important moments for developing distinct understandings of the inter-social dimensions of design practice. How do you, as a designer, citizen, and student host relations? How do you receive and treat guests? How do you engage them in dialogues? How do you draw commonalities and differences? Oftentimes when students invite a guest, there is a general attempt to approach this shared moment informally—yet with special attention and care. Hosting a self-organized event is an opportunity for students to create their own terms, to talk directly and honestly, to ask questions they may not want to ask in the formal setting of a classroom. The rejection of formality is not to be mistaken as a lack of commitment. Informality here is a proposal and a conscious break with the conventions that come with host-guest relations. After all, taking on the role of host means that you *make* the other a guest.<sup>7</sup> A hosting situation can be approached as an experiment, a live test in positioning, in re-shuffling hierarchies, challenging habits and expectations about who is responsible for the encounter. The rejection of form here could be

6. Quicksand is a series of student-run lectures and dinners. With ‘critical design practice’ being either too self-centred to influence or too peripheral to care, Quicksand explores possible strategies for politicality within art & design. [www.sandberg.nl/quicksand-presents-pharmacolonial-connectives](http://www.sandberg.nl/quicksand-presents-pharmacolonial-connectives).
7. Thomas Locher and Beatrice von Bismarck, ‘Art, Exhibition and Hospitality’, in Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, eds., *Cultures of the Curatorial 3: Hospitality: Hosting Relations in Exhibitions* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), p. 73.

high res needed



regarded as a designer's choice to confront established formats of public exchange. Leaving space for re-evaluating modes of communication in an improvisational manner can be expanded to the broader context of design practice. How does a designer address an audience? As viewers or users, or as potential allies, or as adversaries with whom you need to go into discussion and argue? How can design contribute to creating critical publics that bring about *different* positions?

## MAINTENANCE AND CARE

At the Sandberg's design department students may graduate with collective or individual projects. However, more importantly, at the end of their studies, they will have developed unique practices, informed by processes of collective learning and unlearning. They have negotiated struggles. A student graduating from the design department will have engaged with the question: 'What are the stories I need to tell and what are the stories that I am capable of telling?' Their practices continue to grow and change after they leave the department. Many of those future self-determined makers will have rethought design practice for themselves, and will work in inventive ways, engaging with new forms of collaboration that challenge the conventions of a studio practice. Bringing hosting into dialogue with design brings to the fore aspects of collaborative practice that are oftentimes unrecognized yet crucial to address. Considering the variety of practices that spring from the department it is important that design education addresses the conditions under which we work, and invests in a growing awareness about reproductive labour and maintenance work. We cannot vet design practices if we don't talk about how they might (re-)produce exploitative models for practice. It is during studying, during moments of positioning



Caption here lorem ipsum dolor sit amet

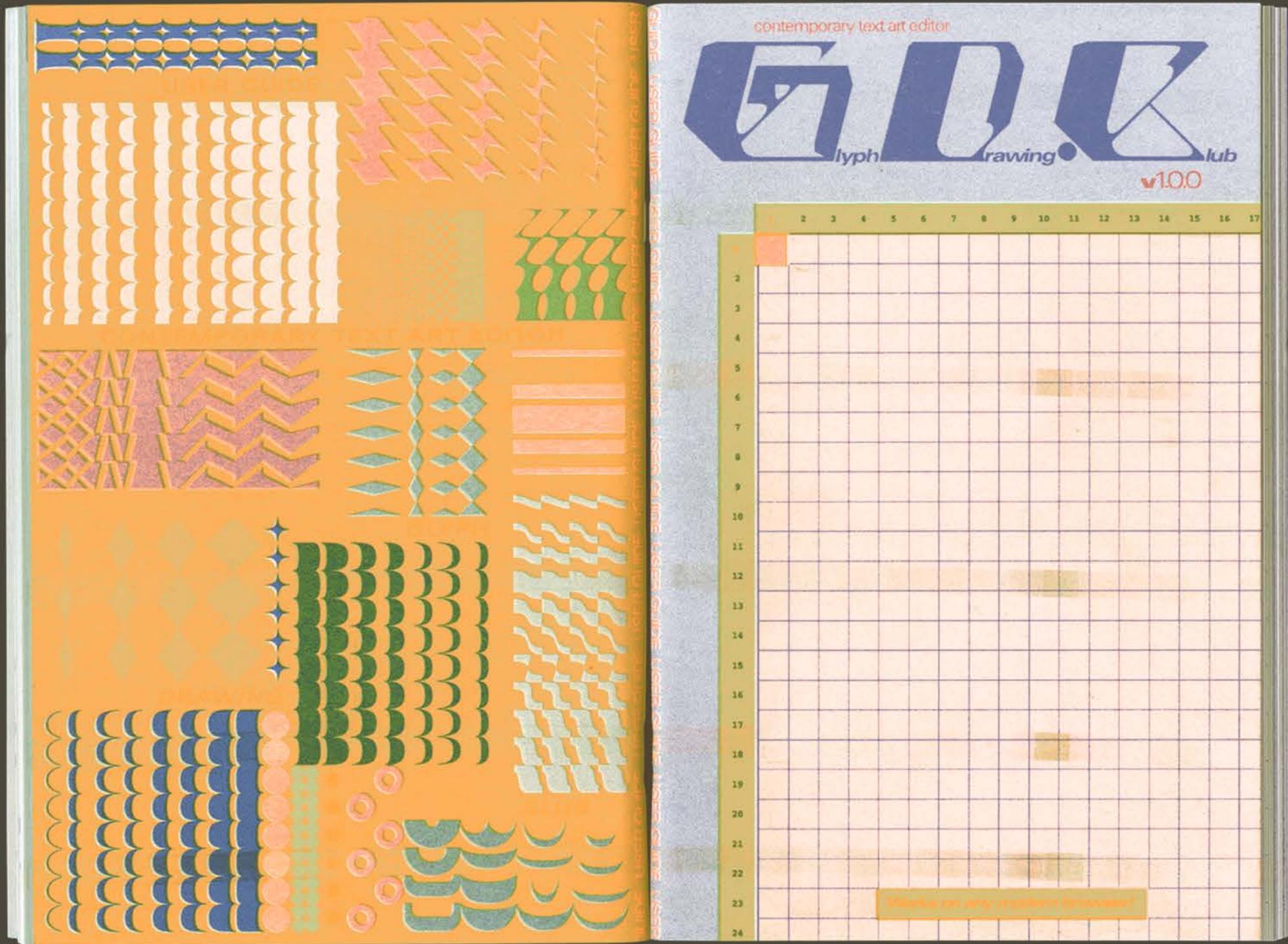
within a field that there is a growing need to be explicit about how we practice—how we treat each other, how we give credit to others.

The work of artist, designer, and Sandberg alumnus Juliette Lizotte speaks to notions of care, radical collectivity including inter-species relations. In her work Juliette proposes feminist thought and more-than-human collaborations as frameworks for addressing design's involvements in environmental issues. Working on the intersection of ecofeminism, fantasy, activism, and digital culture one could view her work as expressive modesty in which a beetroot can become the protagonist, subverting human-centred design approaches and expectations about to whom we—as designers—are accountable. Modesty in this context should however not be mistaken as passivity but instead as a committed, intended and self-reflexive form of environmental critique and a proposal for non-individualistic, centred design practice.

## PLATFORMS, NETWORKS AND SUPPORT STRUCTURES

The platform `GlyphDrawing.Club`,<sup>8</sup> developed by Heikki Heikki Lotvonen in collaboration with Ian Tuomi, is an example of translating 'old school' mentalities of DIY (Do It Yourself) and DIT (Do It Together) culture into new school<sup>9</sup> approaches to tool building. The premise of the platform challenges dominant modes of design production, such as the default use of Adobe's Creative Suite, and as an alternative proposes community building through design. The software is open source, so it can be forked and appropriated by others and as it can be used as a browser interface the drawing tool is also accessible for the less tech-savvy. The drawings can be downloaded in various formats, and be processed further. `GlyphDrawing.Club` is a student project that grew into a cohesive design practice. The makers of the platform were not so much occupied with making beautiful works but were curious about how design tools could be self-made and function as alternatives (not replicas) to dominant proprietary software. Deriving from an inquiry into the hobby practices and fan communities of ASCII art, `GlyphDrawing.Club` builds upon past notions of collectivity<sup>10</sup> without romanticizing retro-tech trends. The platform succeeds in speaking to a community in which users are approached as makers and vice versa.

8. <https://sandberg.nl/graduation2018/heikki-lotvonen>.
9. I paraphrase Rob Schröder, who is a long-term tutor at the Sandberg, the first course director of the design department, a graphic designer, activist and filmmaker. He referred to the `GlyphDrawing.Club` platform as a new school, digital form of crochet.
10. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ASCII\\_art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ASCII_art).





Caption here bist,  
vellecu ptaturites  
volessectur adiatem.

The generosity of building platforms and tools that can be used and appropriated by others is not circumstantial or exceptional in the context of the Sandberg Instituut and the design department. While the students work on research projects, they critically question the very conditions that enable their work. Forming collectives through tool making, and through organizing extra-curricular activities, students actively imagine and develop self-determined design practices. The Sandberg Instituut provides the space and time for design educators and students to experiment with rigorous forms of collaboration, which might even challenge the structure of the institution itself.

The aforementioned student collective PUB was the birthplace of VPN (Virtual Pub Network)—a publishing project of three Sandberg graduates, Miquel Hervás Gómez and Sascha Krischock who studied at the design department, and Agustina Woodgate who studied at the temporary Sandberg Master programme entitled ‘Radical Cut-up’.<sup>11</sup> VPN is a decentralized information infrastructure for publishing, archiving and preserving educational materials, documentation of extra-curricular activities, discussions, and self-initiated student projects. Breaking with the conventional department-centred gradu-

11. ‘Since 2010, director Jurgen Bey has sought to align the instituut with the dynamics of contemporary society by introducing a series of once-off, two-year Temporary Master Programmes in addition to the Main Departments. These temporary programmes challenge and influence the main departments in different ways, raising questions about pedagogy and the role of education in addressing urgent issues affecting contemporary society.’ <https://sandberg.nl/background-information>. <https://sandberg.nl/temporary-programme-radical-cut-up>.

ation exhibitions, the self-built mesh network could be accessed at various graduation locations in different ways. Each node had another characteristic and contributed to the network in a different way. To access the full extent of this decentralized publication, the audience had to move through the city and enter other spaces in order to log onto the local networks. The students challenged the pre-established structure of separated graduation exhibitions, and established their own condition for graduating, which was informed by multiple perspectives and experiences of studying at different departments. VPN is a publishing project enacting the often invisible and ubiquitous information infrastructures in a surprising and playful manner. By logging onto the network, the user who approached as viewer, reader and messenger, is told the story of a collaboration of nodes, their relationships to each other, their modes of communication, including the challenges.

I have experienced the Sandberg Instituut as a student, tutor, and as I am writing this text I prepare myself to succeed Annelys de Vet as the course director of the design department. The design department is a complex and temporal collaborative structure that functions a bit like a network: connecting, sending out signals, establishing and re-establishing protocols, challenging you to think about complex relations and processes. How to take over, maintain and take care of such a complex network? The Sandberg environment—in its complex collaborative structure—is familiar to me. Yet I am certain that I will be continuously challenged in my position. My partial sight, my limits will be confronted, and I will be constantly changed. I believe that in order to continue to stimulate unanticipated collaborations and initiatives the underlying support structure needs to be openly vulnerable yet safe, as it needs to host new, not-yet-defined initiatives. With every new student the departments’ terms for sustaining critical and reflexive conditions for collaborating should be questioned and challenged, iterated on, and if necessary—made undone. The collaborative space of education, a support structure for self-organized learning and inquiry cannot be proclaimed or taken for granted—therefore should not be fetishized. Collaborative practice is a continuous process of negotiation, confrontation, building, breaking, and rebuilding.

Anja Groten (b. 1983) is a designer, educator, and community organizer. Investigating the possibilities and limitations of collaborative practice, her work revolves around the cross-section of digital and physical media, design education, and interdisciplinary collectives. In 2013 she co-founded the initiative Hackers & Designers. Groten currently holds a position as practice-led PhD researcher at ACPA (Academy of Creative and Performing Arts, Leiden University), and the consortium 'Bridging Art, Design and Technology through Critical Making'. In 2019 Anja Groten succeeded Annelys de Vet as the course director of the design department at the Sandberg Instituut, Amsterdam.