

# *the* dale sko *hack*

## EXPLORING MODES OF PRODUCTION AND RE-FORM TACTICS

[Report from experiments in shoe-hacking at Dale Skofabrikk - 26th-28th April 2006]

>project documentation v1.1 May 10th 2006<

Within the logics of industrial capitalism it seems natural to move all production to low cost countries, outsourcing production, service, even research and development. A parallel movement is the rising of urban areas as nodes and epicenters of innovation and connection points of a networked economy. Reading these tendencies it also falls natural to let the rural countryside only evolve as a recreation area and subsidy fed agricultural backyard of production.

But what can be the response to these tendencies from the low-level, off-market and non-metropolis economies? How can we find a method to use the skill of the often highly educated workers and could we thus introduce a wider flexibility in the production process on a micro-scale, finding specific advantages in post-industrial production? What would be the specific cycle of production involved in design at this micro-level and how would it be formed and how would then the new designer role look like? What could be the specific strategies and hands-on practice to offer a complementary mode of production that suits the needs for today's fashion designers and their global markets?

### SHOE-HACK

The Dale Sko Hack workshop and design project is trying to probe the possibilities in local production and appropriational myth-building in an ever increasing global fashion market. Hacking in this sense is the approach of reclaiming the modes of production, taking back initiative and control of an alienated production process and re-forming the process as well as an already existing product. A breaking up, reverse-engineering and tuning of fordist-style production processes. This is an initiative of organized product piracy where designers re-make existing models, misusing and adjusting machines into their own needs. In shoe production this would mean a design practice of altering models without changing the infrastructure, hardware and machinery of the factory. It would also mean a whole re-reading of industrial production, transgression of the industrial dichotomy between designer and producer, co-design and co-location of specific steps in the working process and



even more an exploration on how production at this level can survive in the welfare state.

How would an approach of shoe-hacking look like? How can an appropriational practice be established and how would the expanded role of the designer be in such a methodology? How would a flexible and dynamic design and production process look like where a metaphor of “hacking” would come to full bloom? What are the services the local production unit might offer that the global market cannot? What could be the advantages of the local and how might it be built upon? How is a “limited-edition” economy established and marketed, would it be autonomous and then in what sense?

## RE-ORGANIZATION

The basis for the workshop is the production facility and collections of Dale Skofabrikk in Dale i Sunnfjord some 3 hours drive north of Bergen. A century old factory with a great history of production but today reduced to a small unit working on a line of handmade (but machine supported) shoes with about 10 employees. Because of low budget the factory cannot keep up to the shifts of fashion but is today surviving mainly on folk dress shoes and steady orders from governmental units like the military or police.

But what will happen if a hand full of established fashion designers come to this facility and try to explore how the modes of production can be hacked? How can these designers gain some specific advantages by acting directly by the machines, hacking the models and also provide greater dynamics in the process of production and thus expose what this local factory can produce that might not come out from a similar in Asia. By bringing their own distribution networks the products will automatically reach a wider audience and a global market.

In Sweden there have been many long-term experiments on revitalization of old traditional industries with collaborations with designers for limited edition production. In the textile industry projects as Stickakademien as well as Borås sommarskola are examples of joint approaches with industry, regional government, development funds and designers as well as universities.

## DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

The shoe-hack project is also having a position as a collaborative research project where different actors in design and manufacturing meet to discuss and share views on new modes of production. This process will be furthered by bringing in experts on public relations as well as designers to the shoe-hack. As a part of an artistic research of design facilitation there will also be a publication and theoretical reflection of the process, ending up in a publication on the experiences and a discussion on how the modes of production can be re-organized and re-designed.

The aim is to gather and overview different forces of impetus and interest as well as acclaimed actors to offer fresh approaches to local production as well as global distribution (through the designer’s own networks to start with).



## COLLABORATIVE DESIGN

A question for practical discussion is concerning the interface situation between designer and producer. How will a process of worker co-design look like, and how can this situation offer services that can compete with production in Asia? As customization gets more involved in production how will a post-fordist process of collaborative design look like at this low level? And how will we take best advantage of our highly trained and experienced workforce in as post-industrial situation?

By creating a transparency in the full production cycle but also an insight in the mechanical means of production the Dale Shoe factory can become a design lab for grounded hands-on hacking as well as a theoretical base for discussion on the evolvement of new roles in design and industrial production. By inviting acclaimed designers to hack processes together with experienced workers the Dale shoe hack offers a unique possibility to probe into new modes of production.

## WORKSHOP PROCESS

Before the workshop starts the designers will have a tool-kit sent out to them so they will be well prepared before coming to Dale. The tool-kit will provide documentation of the special local production process and an inventory of specific machinery, models, lasts, facilities and infrastructure of the factory.

During the first day of the workshop there will be a walkthrough of the factory production process, methods in model-making and machine supported shoe-making in small edition together with discussions on how to plan and explore the possibilities of limited-edition production on local scale.

The second day the designers will have finished sketches and the workshop will continue with prototype production at the factory. The designers will participate in the production of their prototype as well as parallel discussions and collaborative work.

The third day will act as a buffer for production as well as a fashion photography session at the factory with models and stylist as an experiment in local branding and positioning.

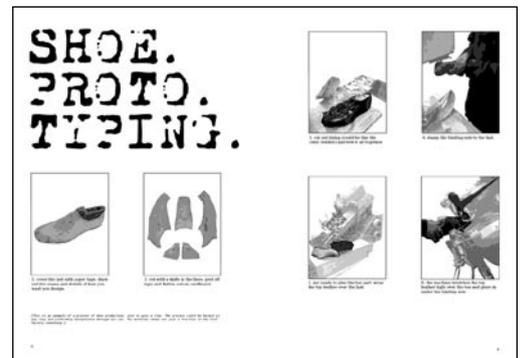
During one evening there will be held a seminar/panel for public discussion about the topic of the workshop. The designers will participate and share their views together with other invited professionals.

## TIME PLAN

The project will start in February 2006 with the distribution of tool-kits to the invited designers. In April the three day workshop will take place. A publication will be produced during the summer 2006.

## EXPECTED OUTCOME

The project will be a research in new local modes of production, exploring hacking as a design practice from a hands-on as well as organizational point of view. By connecting established designers to the factory further collaborations might arise. The publication aims at documenting and reflecting the process but also contributes to the design research discourse by discussing new roles in post-industrial production and design re-organization.



Pages from the toolkit

## DALE SKO HACK – REPORT

>project report v1.0 May 9th 2006<

The Dale Sko Hack was a three day design workshop at the local shoe factory in Dale, Norway, exploring new approaches on the modes of production involved in creating fashion. Six established Norwegian fashion designers were invited to the factory together with an experienced model-maker and the project was documented by a recognized fashion photographer assisted by a stylist.

Point of departure for the project was using the existing “hardware” of the factory, lasts, machines and production equipment but instead hacking the “software” of the production line - choice of designs, materials, processes and methods. Instead of keeping a linear and traditional industrial way of production - how can we produce other flows, channels and interfaces between fashion and off-center, local production facilities?

The workshop started with a presentation of the factory and a machine park walk-through followed by an inventory of the existing materials used in the production. As the factory’s inherent production processes unfolded the designers also collected material samples, assemblages and details from the existing shoe models. During the observations the processes were discussed in detail both with the workers and the model-maker together with the designers for understanding the convergence of skills used in the various steps of production.

After the factory walk-through the workshop continued up at the Nordic Artist Center with a detailed session of model-making, from sketching and drawing on the last to hands-on cutting of stencils and patterns for production. Bringing in various materials the workshop also discussed choice of leather, soles and stitching styles as the session continued until late in the evening.

The following day started early with cutting of material for expanded forms of shoes as well as re-mixing the existing models with new materials and processes. The inventory of tools as well as exploration of techniques continued during the day as the designers proceeded with their new designs together with the factory workers as both parts were developing ways for co-design and meetings of traditional models with new inspirations. As the workers left for the day the designers were left as excess current in the machine, waiting to discharge into new forms of matter orchestrated by the model-maker.

Later in the evening an open discussion was held at the artist center bridging designers and interested participants from the local community. Issues of concern was how fashion can be produced in off-center locations without disappearing into anonymity as well as how specific processes of co-design and value production could be processed through the vectors of the fashion system. It is not enough for a facility to be good at material production and distribution but it also has to have channels into the fashion system for the production of myth. But how can the excess fashion value be led back into the local community and the production facility itself? The discussion continued during the following common dinner at the artist center.

### *participating designers:*

*Arne & Carlos (www.arne-carlos.com)*

*T Michael (www.t-michael.com)*

*Ulla Chauton (www.katulla.com)*

*Siv Stoldal (www.odd.at/Sivsworld)*

*Siri Johansen*

*Model maker: Stein Peterson (www.plus-skolen.no)*

*Photographer: Bent Rene Synnevåg (www.notbent.com)*

*Stylist: Karen Gjelsvik (www.agentk.no)*

*Organizing: Otto von Busch (www.selfpassage.org)*



Arne - a hacking keynote maker with 49 years in the craft



Trying out new choices for material

During the third and final day the production at the factory continued with great intensity as the prototypes materialized in the hands of designers and workers. Most designers worked on two parallel models with varying complexity and correlation with the original models from the factory. Small changes in the patterns were introduced as well as random elements and processes using various punches and stamps to widen the operation and variety of the models and bringing unique values to the originally linear modes of production at Dale Sko.

Not only the outer design was changed but also inner soles and lining with some pairs finalized with special finish inside the shoes for a luxurious feeling to what previously was just traditionally mute.

During the day the new prototypes were documented by the fashion photographer and stylist for creating the important image of fashion, a step usually neglected by producers who take a lot of pride in their superior craftsmanship but forget that most of their consumers will encounter the products as images before they actually step into the shoes. Outside the physical matter of the fashion object is a thin shimmer of mythical image, a readiness created by our visual culture, but specifically in fashion, by the image creators and photographers. To include a distinctive photographer into the project was as important as the designers, since these actors are cooperating as the myth producers of fashion.

Every designer got photographed in their personally designed shoes but draped in sheets to only expose the feet. Various scenographies in the factory and surrounding Dale were used as backdrops.

At the end of the day we held a common discussion and feed-back session gathering the administrators of the factory, Nordic Artist Center and the designers to evaluate the project and take out the course for a further development. The meeting summed up as very positive where the workshop indeed had accomplished more than the limited initial hope from the participants and factory to bloom into a prosperous experience of collaborative work. It had evolved new understandings of shoe production and co-creation for the designers and Dale Sko to find common ground for hacking and “software” tools for co-design.

At this point it seems like hacked shoes from Dale Skofabrikk will be part of new collections from Norwegian designers working worldwide, showing at the fashion weeks in London as well as in Paris – something beyond the previous scope and scale of the shoe factory in Dale, a village on the Norwegian countryside with about 1500 inhabitants with an old shoe factory that now appeared in national media as a progressive force with global connections and shimmering hype.



Random punch decoration by Siv Stoldal



Experimental re-mix of traditional folk dress shoes

Looking back at the project from a more reflective perspective it is apparent that a new role for the designer evolved during the project. The linear, industrial structure of production at the factory was broken up into more intense cells of creation and collaboration to create a wider interface between designers and factory. Instead of creating “divine” sketches in the beginning of the process the designers

worked very close to the production process and methods changed form *ad hoc* during the process. Not only in the total control of the “genius” designer but in collaboration and coexistence with the old models from Dale Sko. As a dialogue the workshop materialized new designs resulting from software hacks inside the processes of the factory.

The works of Siv Stoldal could be seen as a quintessential hacking of the *modus operandi* as she used the already existing models only changing materials and introducing random punch decorations to the designs. Every pair thus becomes unique but still preserves the integrity of the traditional models from Dale Sko. Arne and Carlos strategy of “pimpifying” a traditional model also changed the expression by slightly altering the cut and adding new materials, turning the shoe into a daring style. As T-Michael redrew the form and changed the material into exclusively treated seal skin he introduced a Victorian dandy style to the model but also revealed how the shape of the foot and forms of the existing lasts can communicate to produce new visual expressions.

Not only was the material production changed but also the process for creating image and myth. By connecting channels directly to Dale Sko from actors within the fashion system the current of fashion myth was injected into the realm of the local facility, far away from the main vectors of myth flows (like fashion capitals, markets and magazines). Underlining the potential of the local the current from the established fashion designers not only created positive media attention to the factory but also a better story for the designers to sell, as local Norwegian shoe production could move from a picturesque, local and ethical value into something hyped, cool and truly fashionable avant-garde.

When saying the role of the designer changed I not only mean that the “genius” designer as been dethroned into a collaborative change agent but instead expanded the aesthetic field of manipulation within reach. By orchestrating open interfaces of design self-organization the involved designers transgressed their previous borders of action as well as injected energy at a new frequency at the local facility.

Design self-organization could be seen as a practice of creating small open cells of negotiation as a conscious tool for bringing the design process into a new field of action. These cells are small publics or interfaces where designers and participating actors meet on equal ground in a process of small change or hacking, using their own tools and understandings to dive deeper into practical dialogue and hands-on exploration. Not to change the whole process or hardware of a facility but to modulate the flows and functions. As the negotiation in this specific small public progress (the settings are of many small publics, small changes, small hacks) it is also important to support this intermutual change by connecting it into other publics to enhance and amplify the possible impacts into other publics.

As the process showed during the workshop it is very important that these negotiation and publics are done in humble and respectful ways. To deal with a proud local actor in decline is a sensitive collaboration where the designers have to proceed with caution not to



Hacked pimp style shoes by Arne and Carlos



Sketching and hands-on works.

hurt any feelings during the process. Big ego designers are not usually the best negotiators and could seriously harm both the collaborative design process as well as sucking out all energy invested into the project. But as it showed during the workshop it is very possible to create very intense and positive changes by open negotiations and positive small change.

By bringing in the eyes of media as well as putting the spotlight at the collaborative working process new viewpoints were formulated into renewed handcraft pride. For the shoe factory to be recognized and respected not only for its old merits but also for its concern to go further and keep on being a progressive local player with global fashion connections the media attention became a recognition for its hard work.

In this case the positive feedback from the workers and apparent furthering and re-energization of the work process in the factory showed that it was indeed very possible to bring traditional industrial production into becoming a progressive force in the local community.

Thus the project also became a tool for enablement and powering up hyphenated functions in the production, energizing modulation and spontaneous working processes exposing deeper layers of knowledge and putting them into better use as their value can be an exposed part of the final fashionable result.

Next step for the project will be to support the new connections and collaborations between the designers and the factory, both the design publics and contacts that came out of the workshop but mainly as points of departure for further commercial transactions. It is not enough that the fashion designers produce their rather small collections of shoes in Dale but it is also needed to support the attention the factory might get from this collaboration. If the channels of fashion start energizing the brand of Dale Sko it is also important that the shoe factory is ready to respond to that by further developing their models. The changes they will need to do to keep up with fashion could be quite small and simple, just as the workshop proved, but these small changes needs still to be done with careful sensitivity. It would also be preferred if this would be done in a similar way of respect and sensibility that was shown by the workshop participants.

During the summer 2006 there will also be produced a documentation of the project in the form of a book, collecting a series of articles as well as the theoretical background of the project and illustrated with images both from the process as well as the final fashion shootings. To be of further use the book will be in a semi-manual format so other local industries can explore this model of work further.

The project got publicity in various media: NRK Vestlandsrevyen (TV), NRK Sogn og Fjordane (Radio), Bergens Tidene and Firda (national and local papers).

The Dale Sko Hack was organized by fashion researcher Otto von Busch in collaboration with Dale Sko Fabrikk and Nordic Artist Center. The project was generously supported by Innovation Norge, Fjaler Naringsutveckling, Norsk Kulturrad, IASPIS and Nordic Artist Center ([www.nkdale.no](http://www.nkdale.no)).



Ulla in boots made for walking all over you!



T-Michael wrapped for fashion shooting in Dale