

## Knyttan and the question of design autonomy

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source: <http://www.somersethouse.org.uk/visual-arts/knyttan-factory-of-the-future> ]

Have you ever wanted to design your own scarf, jumper or even tie, but can't knit?' read the first sentence on the Somerset House [website](#) introducing [Knyttan - Factory of the Future](#), currently based in the New Wing. Despite already knowing how to knit, I was nonetheless interested to what extent visitors of *Knyttan* would be granted involvement in the design process. Having been doing research on (hand) knitting for the past few years, I was obviously curious about this unusual combination of industrial production and individuality, and visited the Factory of the Future on February 28<sup>th</sup> 2015 to find out for myself.

Upon entering the room, I was immediately drawn to the garments laid out on the shelves and hung on the wall. The 100% (monofilament) merino wool used really makes for a soft feel. I can see why

someone would want their body to be wrapped in one of those jumpers. It was fascinating to be in a place where the goods on display were not presented for sale, but instead for reference. These articles of clothing were prototypes, which potential customers could touch, knead, try on and test for fit. The jumper one would be able to take home with upon purchase, however, was not yet in existence. For me, the room was filled with potentiality. I saw the coloured yarn coiled on the bobbins and imagined their combination. I contemplated this massiveness of a machine and the thought pleased me that it would be able to knit whatever I wanted it to knit – and within a short stretch of time too. I enjoyed the idea that here, jumpers would only be knitted if they were also guaranteed a home. I found myself attracted to the truly relational ambition of *Knyttan*: making each garment for one specific person. By contrast, I always find it somewhat perverse that the garments in clothing stores need to literally ‘hang in there’ until some customer at long last takes pity and has the mercy to buy them, enabling them to finally fulfil their original purpose.

By the windows, a few tablet computers had been installed, which drew my attention. The shop assistant approached me and instructed me on how to use the machines to come up with my own design. There were four design templates – conceived of by textile designers – that I could alter by moving around my finger on the tablet. Squeezing the lines on the screen together or pulling them apart them caused a grid design to be cambered, transforming flat straightness into warped spatiality. In addition, a set of fixed colour combinations and three sizes for both men and women could be chosen from. It was amusing to play with the design and combined colour options and see how they would turn out on a jumper as the software simultaneously visualised the pattern-design-in-transformation on a jumper worn by a digital mannequin. I would have loved to see the machine in action and be granted the voyeuristic pleasure of witnessing the emergence of a garment, and to be present in what we are often most excluded from: industrial production. Unfortunately, at £200 for setting the machine in action and having one’s own custom jumper knitted, this was sadly out of my reach.

Although I found the project’s motivation to make production visible, to relate production to consumption even in an industrial context and to draw us back into the relational nature of clothing, I do not entirely agree with the way they promote their unique offering. While I did enjoy the playfulness of designing ‘my’ jumper, I remained nonetheless disappointed by the limits that had been set in terms of design and creativity. How could choosing from four pre-defined designs, a few pre-set colour combinations, fixed sizes as well as fiddling around on a tablet possibly fulfil the promise of ‘designing my own’? How could the design of someone else magically transform into my own by being given only a handful of altering options? The knitters I worked with in Austria would have quite a different view on what it means to design your own jumper.

Putting aside the fact that in the *knyttan project* design and making are necessarily divorced from each other, which would probably be the main difference between hand knitting and *knyttan*, we are dealing with two very diverging notions of design autonomy here. In the first case, designing is much more like customising, which means the pre-existing design will only be transformed to the extent that it is still recognisable as such. The original (professional) designer is still visible in the

design, albeit some parameters of the design have been altered.

In the second case, designing (and making) means matching (relations of) relations between yarn, needles, pattern, cut and the knitting as well as the body that is destined to wear it. Always underpinned by intentions which are themselves grounded in social relations (cf. Gell 1998), design is an empathetic process which correlates the myriad possibilities of yarn weight, yarn quality, yarn colour, needle size, pattern (does it stretch or not?), cut (waisted or not?), knitting and wearing body to each other. In this case, designing your own pullover means relating needle-to-yarn-to-pattern-to cut-to-body and materialising these relations in practice. In doing so, the designs render the knitters, their skills and their preferences with respect to yarn quality and colour visible. Although knitters nowadays mostly draw on industrially produced yarn and colour ranges that are themselves constrained by the fashion industry, the possible combinations are unquestionably more diverse. The possibilities of harmonising one's internal self and with its textile externalisation in the design and making processes are therefore equally manifold.

But then again, *knyttan* does not define itself within the framework of hand knitting, but within the conventional fashion industry. In that sense, one cannot criticise them for their limitations in relation to hand knitting, but one must instead acknowledge that their ambition is quite extraordinary within the context of the dominant fashion industry. Design autonomy, then, equally needs to be seen as relative to the context within which the concept is used. Whereas costumers who usually consume ready-made clothing will appreciate the chance to be granted a participation in the design process, in light of the limitedness of participation possibilities adept knitters might, however, regard it as a sham.