The Nature of Collaboration in the Digital Age

Pauline Verbeek-Cowart
Professor and Chair/Fiber, Kansas City Art Institute, pcowart@kcai.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf

Part of the Art and Materials Conservation Commons, Art Practice Commons, Fashion Design Commons, Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons, Fine Arts Commons, and the Museum Studies Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/991

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
The Nature of Collaboration in the Digital Age
Pauline Verbeek-Cowart
Professor and Chair/Fiber, Kansas City Art Institute
pcowart@kcai.edu

I proposed this talk because the subject matter "Collaboration in the Digital Age" seemed timely and relevant. What I hope to achieve with this paper is to present initial material that could start a dialogue; a conversation that needs to happen to clarify what "Collaboration in the Digital Age" means. I am going to give an example of a truly magnificent collaboration and compare and contrast that with my personal trajectory. I want to preface this by saying that my comments are filtered through the lens of a maker and an educator. I chair the Fiber program at the Kansas City Art Institute so I am keenly aware of the fact that we are facing a bit of a crises. The world needs more creative problem solvers, yet I witness the steady decline of problem solving skills in the generation entering college.

Here I would like to quote Einstein who said: "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them". This does not bode well for the millennials, the generation that is self absorbed and only interested in having a relationship with their cell phones. Every year when I evaluate our curriculum and teaching methodologies I ask myself the question: is what we are teaching still relevant and more importantly, how do we engage these millennials, who seem so disengaged. How do you deliver content in an age where access to content and the democratization of information has exploded?

At KCAI, we recognized the importance of teaching problem solving skills and decided to tackle the problem by facilitating the development of collaborative thinking with several new initiatives. One of them is our brand new Fablab with an exhibition space and the latest of all of the now ubiquitous digital tools including cnc-routers, laser cutters and 3-D printers.

Inside David T. Beals Studios with TC-2 loom, image credit: Mark McDonald
In addition to the standard technology we also have a TC-2, a hand operated digital Jacquard Loom developed and manufactured in Norway. Surprisingly it is the loom that is getting all of the attention and intrigues the students most. We designed the space from the start to bring disciplines together, remove barriers and create an atmosphere and space that would include all phases of the workflow including a classroom in the fabrication area. By focusing on an open structure for the main hall, we have created a space where community building and collaboration can be a part of the process. Students from different disciplines come with very different skillsets and learn from each other. They put their phones away and talk. In doing so they are laying the foundation for more collaborative engagement and expanding their thinking. These tools are so new that the playing field has been leveled as we are all earning together.

The digital age has also created a need for human interaction and conversation. This is brilliantly discussed in Sherry Turkle's most recent book from which I quote: "Solitude reinforces a secure sense of self, and with that, the capacity for empathy. Then, conversation with others provides rich material for self-reflection. Just as alone we prepare to talk together, together we learn how to engage in a more productive solitude".

We know that we have to provide students with the space but we also need to model the behavior we are seeking to instill in them. Collaboration does not necessarily come naturally for most of us; personally I always saw my studio practice as a solitary experience. I am perfectly happy with my looms as studio mates, especially my TC-1. In the studio I am in full control and
responsible for every decision. A collaboration however, requires trust and a willingness to relinquish control and put aside ego and ownership.

My studio work took a drastic turn in 2003 when I was approached by the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection about a possible commission for their new 3000-seat sanctuary. They wanted tapestries like the ones at the Cathedral of the Lady of the Angels in LA but they did not have millions to spend. They told me they were woven in Belgium. Belgium being the birthplace of tapestry, I assumed they were woven in the traditional manner, and did not give it another thought. I wanted this commission and I was faced with a dilemma, they wanted a narrative depicting specific stories from the bible.

So I embarked on my first ever collaboration with my colleague Steve Mayse, the chair of our illustration program who was going to help me with the designs. It was immensely rewarding and we pulled it off.

It was not until years later when I found myself in LA, presenting at CAA that I decided to go early and hunt for these tapestries. I was expecting to see impressive tapestries but nothing had prepared me for the awe-inspiring experience I had in this magnificent space completely shaped by the presence of these tapestries.
I spent hours examining each one up close and my weaver’s eye had so many questions. These tapestries created an unparalleled visual experience, their epic scale, their tactility and the sheer beauty of the weave structures and sophisticated color palette, not to mention their persuasive content. What I was seeing was not simply a conversion of color into structure; this was the most magnificent interpretation and translation I had ever seen.

My curiosity was peaked; I had to find out more about them. To my surprise and delight I found a documentary about the making of these tapestries. As I understand it, the story goes that John Nava a CA based painter was selected for the commission but his proposal was halted when the acoustical engineers determined that they needed tapestries to absorb the noise created by the stone structure. He enlisted the help of his long time friend, Donald Farnsworth. Neither one knew anything about weaving but Don was an expert at digitizing images for printmaking and therefore had an advanced knowledge of color theory and practice. I was not surprised to learn that Don was involved in this project as, in 1981, when he founded his business, I was one of his students at The California College of Arts and Crafts as it was called then, and I remembered all of the fieldtrips he took my class on. He was involved in many projects and he spoke about them with such passion, clarity and vision.
The two had several problems to solve, one of them: finding the right mill. They teamed up with Flanders Tapestries, a small mill in Belgium, that had shifted their focus from weaving for the furniture market and commercial products to making reproductions of traditional tapestries. The other problem to solve was the constraint of time. To fill this space with full scale paintings would have taken John decades to complete and they had less than 2 years, so the 2 developed designs that were digital composites. John painted specific features, heads, hands, feet and the rest of the canvas was filled with stone textures from photographs taken in Jerusalem. Don developed the software, an algorithm mapping 240 colors to weave structures using a spectrometer. Only through this digital translation could the 46 tapestries each measuring at a minimum 7 feet wide and 14 feet high have been realized. The most spectacular is the north wall with 5 tapestries towering more than 40 feet high.

I knew about the commercial work being produced by Magnolia Editions and had always questioned the integrity of this work. I had problems with the idea of translating works of art into the medium of weaving when those works originally were not intended to become weavings. I know now that I should have been critical of the press and the art critics who do not understand the difference between a canned translation and a truly magnificent tapestry.

Through collaborations we can also find our soul mates; people who are likeminded and understand our passion. We connect at conferences and events that attract people who share an interest. Many of us in academia have gathered at the Jacquard Center in Hendersonville, North Carolina. It is through the dedication and persistence of its founder, Bethanne Knudson, that many of us have received training in Jacquard technology. Bethanne made Jacquard Design accessible and real for us. We wove our designs at nearby mills and later at the Oriole Mill.
Oriole Mill, Hendersonville, North Carolina, image credit: Pauline Verbeek-Cowart

Textile Museum in Tilburg, The Netherlands, image credit: Pauline Verbeek-Cowart
Bethanne introduced me to all things Jacquard, and understands the quest for magical yarn interlacing. So rather than complementing skills we overlap in many ways. For more than 20 years we have embarked on many adventures that have enriched my life and teaching. In 2003 we traveled to The Textile museum in Tilburg and exhibited that work a year later in Denver at The Handweaver's guild of America conference.

We also wove a project in Canada after which Bethanne's vision of the Oriole Mill was shaped and started taking form. In the early years of the mill we co-founded Studio Structure we thought it could give us a vehicle to formalize our collaborations and to stay in touch as I was teaching full time and lived in Kansas and Bethanne in North Carolina.

Together we created lots of beautiful designs, but what trumps everything and what has endured is precious time at the loom: thinking, dreaming and sharing ideas.

What I would like to say in conclusion is that collaborations are wonderful and give birth to new ideas and possibilities, the result of minds and skills coming together to create something new that would otherwise not have been possible.