

# Metalinguistic Games

*Åbåke's playground*

To define Åbåke as a transdisciplinary graphic design collective is like saying that La Sagrada Familia is a church. In other words, it is technically accurate, but does not conjure up the least notion of what the entity is like. With fingers, toes, and other bodily appendages readily dipping into the pools of art, architecture, music, fashion, food, literature, film, education, and much more besides, the group of four operates as virulently as the toughest virus, entering where it wants to go, when it wants to go there, in a sincere ploy to engender thought amongst the public about the things that matter in life.

FRANCESCO SPAMPINATO



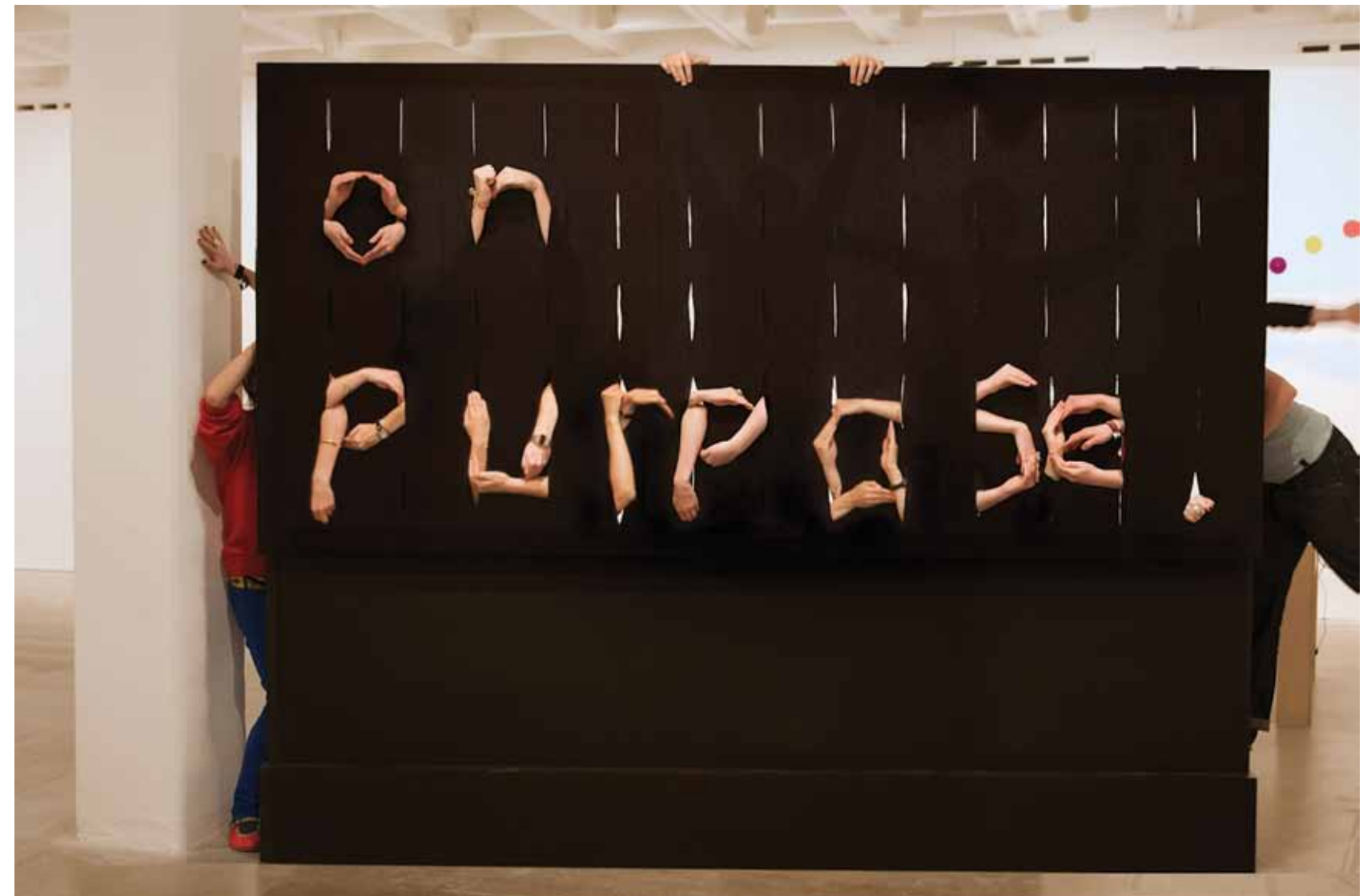
Originally, Åbåke was associated with the French electronic music label and fashion brand Kitsuné. In fact, Kitsuné is just one collateral galaxy – and not even representative – of the universe that is Åbåke, the London-based design studio run by Patrick Lacey, Benjamin Reichen, Kajsa Ståhl, and Maki Suzuki. Active since 2000, the team of Royal College of Art alumni count among their clients the British Council and the Serpentine Gallery, and have collaborated with fashion designers Hussein Chalayan and Maison Martin Margiela, artists Ryan Gander, Johanna Billing, and Martino Gamper, and 'French Touch' icons Air and Daft Punk.

However, as the term Åbåke (the Swedish word for a large and cumbersome object) suggests, the group supports the burden of design on commission terms, only to learn the rules and conventions that they are

then happy to deconstruct at other times. Åbåke, indeed, is also responsible for meta-design projects of the independent, transdisciplinary, cooperative, and often participatory sort: the dialogical digital platform for architecture Sexymachinery (2000-2008), the relational culinary events of Trattoria (2003), the publishing project Dent-De-Leone (2009-ongoing), the propaganda for the imaginary Victoria & Alferd Museum (2010), the spy agency Åffice Suzuki (2010), and several other context-specific activities all over the world.

The invitation to museum exhibitions and biennials is always an excuse to observe the cultural conditions in which art and design from abroad relates to local conditions. A clear example is the project realised for the 2014 Istanbul Design Biennial, where Åbåke looks at one of the most representative Turkish traditions: bathing culture. Here, the group has translated into Turkish an unrealised proposal by Finnish architect Alvar Aalto for a Kulttuurisauna, a space that works both as a sauna and a cultural space for conversation and creativity. Creating a pastiche, the words Le Centre de Bronx Soleil are applied to ceramic wall tiles, overlaying abstract and decorative graphic elements inspired by Le Corbusier's frescos in Eileen Gray's villa. What emerges, in the end, is not only a research-oriented form of site-specificity, but also an investigation of the idea of global transcendence itself.

The group is part of a new generation of graphic design collectives whose practice is more akin to conceptual art than to graphic design per se. Others are Metahaven, Project Projects, and Dexter Sinister. What they have in common is a proactive practice, made of unsolicited proposals and dysfunctional projects. It's no surprise that they have been grouped



LIMB TYPOGRAPHY: ON PURPOSE, 2008 (1)  
Performance, co-curated with Nav Haq, Arnolfini, Bristol  
Courtesy of the artist

ARTISTS COCKTAILS, BY RYAN GANDER, 2013 (2)  
Book designed by Åbåke, published by Dent De Leone  
Courtesy of the artist

VICTORIA & ALFERD MUSEUM: MAMMALS POSTER, 2011 (3)  
Museum Show Part 1, Arnolfini, Bristol  
Courtesy of the artist

LE CENTRE DE BRONX SOLEIL, 2014  
Installation view at the 2nd Istanbul Biennial, IKSU, Istanbul  
Photo: Ali Guler





1

WHEN IS A YES A NO?, 2011 (1)  
Poster insert for Graphic #20  
Courtesy of the artist

BIG BANG AND HEAT DEATH,  
2014 (2)  
Åbåke, with Nene Tsuboi &  
Tuomas Toivonen  
Installation view at Post-  
Speculation: Act II, PI, New York  
Glass cubes designed in  
collaboration with Oiva Toikka  
Unique blown glass produced in  
Finland by Iittala  
8.5 x 6.5 x 8.5 cm each  
Courtesy of PI, New York

AVANT LA FAIM ET APRÈS:  
JUMEAUX, 2014 (3)  
Sculptural objects  
A public commission from  
the Centre National des Arts  
Plastiques, Paris, in collaboration  
with the Musée de la Danse,  
Rennes  
Photo: Nyima Leray  
Courtesy of Musée de la Danse,  
Rennes, and CNAP, Paris and  
CNAP, Paris

in conversations – i.e. the 2009 Iaspis Forum On Design and Critical Practice at the Architectural Association, London, and exhibitions like the itinerant Graphic Design: Now in Production, co-curated by Andrew Blauvelt and Ellen Lupton. A lens through which we can read this new attitude is the concept of ‘speculation’, as analysed by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby in *Speculative Everything* (MIT Press, 2013). “Once designers step away from industrial production and the marketplace,” they suggest, “we enter the realm of the unreal, the fictional, or what we prefer to think of as conceptual design – design about ideas.” This is the case with the Åbåke group, who use modes, conventions, language, and support proper graphic design in order to re-think the ways in which design articulates information and culture.

#### BENT AND TWISTED AND SO INTRIGUING

The main feature of the group, then, is its metalinguistic nature, treating design as subject matter. Publications, curatorships, talks, and workshops are an integral part of its activities, but these are not just media, their content is the medium itself. Åbåke makes publications about publications, talks about talks, curatorial projects about curating, workshops disguised as parties, and parties as workshops. For the group constantly attracts the attention of the art world, and the more it does so, the more it plays with it. For instance, when I invited them to be part of my book *Come Together: The Rise of Cooperative Art and Design* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2014), Åbåke agreed to participate only in exchange for a biography – of which



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this article is an extension – whereby I had to insert myself in the third person, “so it isn’t authorless”, they said, thus putting into crisis my role as a critic and the conditions under which I normally associate intellectual values with cultural phenomena. So far, that text has become the group’s official biography.

A logical extension of this playful approach to the meaning and role of art in our era has recently brought the collective to embrace a production that we can define as ‘sculptural’, even though it is still informed by design and crafts skills. For *Post-Speculation: Act II at PI*, a space run by Project Projects in Chinatown, New York, Åbåke presented – in collaboration with Finnish glass-blowing icon Oiva Toikka – two glass cubes, part of a series of abstract representations of thermodynamic events that affected the actual configuration of the universe, from the Big Bang to Heat Death: so abstract, yet so romantic. For a public commission by the Centre national des arts plastiques, Paris, and the Musée de la danse, Rennes, Åbåke organised a workshop in which students created a series of handmade utensils that were later displayed in cabinets, as if they were artefacts from a primitive society. Far from the smoothness of the glass cubes, those pieces similarly invite us to reflect on the limit between functionality and contemplation, on why we need art and what if we expect design to be more of a critical tool than an operational one. <

Francesco Spampinato is the author of *Come Together: The Rise of Cooperative Art and Design*, published by Princeton Architectural Press, New York, November 2014. francescospampinato.com

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