9 Voices of Rebellion
Interviews with Former Students at the Copenhagen School of Arts and Crafts 1969

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As part of the on-going project Inflections of Design, Art and Craft – Debates and reforms at the Danish design schools since 1967, we have initiated a series of interviews with former students at the two state-supported design schools situated in Copenhagen and Kolding. The goal of the project is to clarify how ideals of and debates on art, craft and design have formed the Danish design schools and their relationships to culture, industry and politics (Lees-Maffei & Sandino 2004). The project’s starting point is to investigate the turbulent years around 1970, to trace how the debates and the schools developed and shaped the expectations of design today. This is crucial because the history of the Danish design schools and the underlying debates have neither been researched nor systematically documented. This investigation aims to discuss references to understandings of art and craft in Danish Design critically, and contribute to contemporary discourses about the role of design education in society. Radical changes in the societal tasks of design have been on the agenda since the late 1960s, and in order to fully understand the current situation, we need to uncover the trajectory of the debates and reforms.

In the following, we present extracts and preliminary insights from three interviews with active participants in the student rebellion at the School of Arts and Crafts (Kunsthåndværkerskolen) in Copenhagen, which at the time was under the umbrella institution, Copenhagen Technical Schools. Formally, it was named ‘School of Arts and Crafts and Industrial Arts’ since a merger with the Drawing and Industrial Arts School (Tegne- og Kunstindustriskolen) in 1967 but this full name was hardly used. The protests culminated with the rebellion’s occupation of the Ministry of Culture on 3 March 1969 (Land og Folk 1969) (Figure 9.1) and later the principal’s office at the School of Arts and Crafts on 1 May 1969 (Jyllandsposten 1969). These events caught the attention of the press and other media thus some written sources are available and investigated in Chapter 10. Apart from the descriptions in the press, our preliminary studies have shown that there are few and scattered written sources available in national libraries and the school archives. We therefore find it important to supplement the documents with oral testimonies from first-hand witnesses before it is too late, as most former students are now in their mid-70s and beyond. Both the educational culture and professional practice of arts and crafts and design had a rather low level of written communication, which makes oral accounts central. Internationally there have been other projects involving oral history in the field of arts and crafts and design (Oak 2006; Sandino 2006), but mostly with a

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focus on professional design practice, and to our knowledge, no investigations of oral recollections of educational history and culture in design has been carried out so far.

**Method**

According to Sandino, interviews are now a standard method for ‘eliciting information’ about objects, practices and cultures (Sandino 2006). On the other hand, oral history ‘focuses on people in order to understand them as subjects in the socio-historical contexts of the immediate past or the present’ (Sandino 2006, 275). In this project, oral histories were gathered, through a series of semi-structured interviews carried out between October 2020 and July 2021. The first took place at Design School Kolding – due to the location of the participant and long affiliation with the institution, and the two others were carried out in the participants’ studio workshops in Copenhagen. The three interviews followed the same list of issues but allowed conversations to diverge according to the participants’ different experiences and memories of the events.

The issues of the participants’ roles in the rebellion and their reasons for protesting were used to open the conversation. Then we moved on to talk about general
issues including the teaching, relation between students and teachers, management of the school and desires for change in the education. The third issue concerned the on-going debates and understandings of art, crafts and industrial production at the school. The fourth issue focused on relationships and divergences between departments and disciplines at the schools, from textiles, furniture and ceramics to graphic design and fashion, as well as external relationships to rebellious groups of students at the School of Architecture and universities. And finally, a fifth issue was raised on engagement in societal and cultural critique, production, consumption and the environment. Here the outcome of the interviews is reduced to three themes, the reasons for rebellion, desires for change in the curriculum and, finally, the question of societal criticism, where the interviewees turned out to be surprisingly reluctant to claim any higher goals for the rebellion. The recollections of involvement seemed to be rather in line with the later professional practices of the three participants.

In this study, oral history as a way of collecting information poses some challenges in terms of validity due to the long time span since the events took place and the very nature of the participants’ memories. Many details have been lost in the individual recollections, and to spark memory we sometimes had to introduce images and information from archival sources. However, the interviewees also added to the written material with valuable personal descriptions of the events and their motives for taking part in the rebellion, aspects not present in the newspaper articles or other sources we have identified. Furthermore, and unexpectedly, one participant brought along original internal documents from her personal archive, thus giving unique insight into the students’ thoughts and demands of dissolving the strict school system.

In the next paragraph, we introduce the participants before going into the interview data and discussing preliminary findings. The participants were recruited based on personal connections to one of the authors and knowledge of their personal roles in the protests. By chance, they actually represent three different career paths within design, art and craft, corresponding to the research focus in our ongoing project on the debates and reforms of Danish design schools since 1967.

Participants’ backgrounds

Birte Sandorff Lock was educated in the textile department from 1965 to 1969 and specialised in woven designs for industrial production. After refusing to attend the exam, she left the school to work as a freelance designer of interior textiles for Cotil and other Danish companies. She later started teaching at the Kolding School of Arts and Crafts, where she also became head of the textile department, and later principal of the school from 1996 to 2007.

Kirsten Dehlholm was educated in the textile department from 1966 to 1969 and specialised in textile art. Without completing the education and refusing third year exams, she left the school and started working as a freelance set designer for theatres. In 1977, she was one of the founders of the artist collective Billedstof Teatret and in 1985 she established the experimental theatre company Hotel Pro Forma. In 1995, she was awarded a lifelong grant from the Danish Art Foundation.

Helle Nybo Rasmussen was educated in the ceramic department from 1964 to 1969 (including one year of maternity leave) and specialised in ceramic murals and building parts, along with functional ceramic items. She refused to attend the exam and left
the school to establish a studio workshop and produce hand-crafted ceramics. Later in 1979–1980, she returned as a guest student and graduated with an exam. Besides her studio craft practice, she taught ceramics at a folk high school for a number of years.

Reasons for the rebellion

A strong common theme we can identify from the three participants is their view of the school as an authoritarian old-fashioned institution with rigid rules and traditional ways of teaching. On the other hand, they also praise several aspects of attending the school and express satisfaction with some teachers. In the following, we will mainly focus on the discontent leading to the rebellion and only briefly touch upon the positive statements. Out of the three participants, Sandorff recounted the events in most details, and at the very start of the conversation she explains:

The rebellion that took place at the School of Architecture was very much an example for the School of Arts and Crafts – at the time, half of us had boyfriends at the School of Architecture. Kirsten Dehlholm was, so to speak, our pioneer, and was also the one who, kind of, gathered the different groups at the school and gave talks about it. A general discontent was accumulating regarding the fact that many old teachers were very, one might say, authoritarian and perhaps also rather stagnant, and we wanted much more … School registers were kept, which meant that if you arrived five minutes late, you got a whole day of absence, and if you had a certain amount, you were expelled. That’s just how it was. And you had six weeks in a year as a maximum which one could miss. Some of us also had children along the way, and if you wanted to continue you only had six weeks of maternity leave. But it was not called maternity leave, it was simply your sickness absence, and otherwise, you had to start the school year over again.

(Sandorff)

Dehlholm confirms the motives for the rebellion and puts it this way:

The reason for starting the rebellion was that … we wanted out of Technical Society schools. That was … vital to us … And then we wanted to move to another ministry … I do not remember if it was the Ministry of Culture, we wanted to be a part of. [She goes on to explain what she liked and did not like at the school:] … I just loved being there, so I was there all the time. But I did not like that the teaching was so organised. It was organised in such small portions – an hour with that, and an hour with that, and an hour with that, and an hour with that – … it was the only thing I did not like.

(Dehlholm)

So along with other students, she advocated for longer courses.

I liked long courses … otherwise, I kind of did what I wanted. So, I loved it all, I loved being there, and I worked all the time. But then came ‘68, where there was rebellion everywhere. And I also had to get involved in that, so I started, and then I became the leader right away – just like that, of the rebellion. I always say it
was where I learned to speak into a microphone – so I have done that a lot. And we have probably been somewhat disorganised, but we had meetings all the time, and we occupied the principal’s office, besides the Ministry of Culture – that I cannot remember – but occupying of principal’s office I can remember. ... I really liked our teachers. The rebellion was in no way against them, and they also agreed with us. They also kind of thought it was right.

(Dehlholm)

Likewise, ceramist Helle Nybo Rasmussen was not pleased with a lot of things at the school, but also calls it ‘a splendid environment’:

As a more mature student I felt that the teaching was too rigid. You know, there was not much independence, as you would demand as a more mature student. Then you want to be respected for having your own opinions on certain issues, and this was, I suppose, one of the reasons why I got involved so much in critiquing the way of teaching. I had a great time, when I came into the school. I thought this was a splendid environment to be part of. It was like coming home, I felt. But there were a lot of things that were less satisfying. And I thought that the headmaster’s style, the school bell, the grades, were kind of irrelevant, and I thought that the intellectual stimulus was too weak.

(Rasmussen)

Birte Sandorff also explains that:

The rebellion smouldered for many years at the school. We all knew each other, and it very much originated from the textile department, but we all had the feeling of ‘what is going on?’, and it happened everywhere in the different schools and universities, so it was, you could say, the culture of the time.

At this point, she pulls out an original document authored by the students in March 1969 and starts reading aloud:

We hereby refuse to approve the current type of exam; we hereby refuse to attend/prepare for the exam ... The form of the examination is highly restrictive and controlling work time has nothing to do with the working methods which otherwise underlie the basis of and reflect the students’ results from the remaining part of the year. The students’ diverse interests and talents are not taken into account by the examinators at the exams. The same criteria cannot be the foundation for all of the students’ work. The technical quality of the work is judged separately from the artistic quality of the work.

(Sandorff)

Sandorff pauses to give an example of an exam in freehand drawing before continuing to read from the document:

The assessment is made by incompetent people. ...We hereby refuse to approve any kind of exam. Instead of an exam, we want an assessment of the work the student has done during the year – solely based on these works a student’s position
can be assessed, for example in the form of a report or final statement. The students themselves must be present at the assessment. In a replacement of the final exam, we likewise want an assessment of the students’ work which has been done during the year, along with a declaration of the fact that the student has followed the teaching of the school for the applicable number of years.

(Sandorff)

She stops reading and says:

And we all signed that. It was ’69, and it was the year I was graduating. Kirsten Dehlholm was a grade under me, her whole class boycotted, but it did not have quite as high a cost [NB: since it was not their final exam] … After all, it was us who boycotted, no other graduating students boycotted the exams like that. So, it was the textile department who did it, and it was clear that Kirsten was the pioneer, and she was well-spoken and went right to the point. The exam took place from 16 April to 1 May 1969. That is, the whole discussion had been going on in the spring. And the paper is from March ’69, where we proclaim that we would not attend the exam.

(Sandorff)

Sandorff states that:

The ceramicists were the next to join in, and so it spread. But I think, when it was the textile department who were in front, it was largely from a certain pressure from Kirsten because she was a strong person, and she was a firm advocate for this. She was very politically engaged … and was definitely a rebellious lady – and also one with a good head.

(Sandorff)

Referring to the rebellion, Rasmussen recounted that:

All the time, we had been criticising, how we had to take final exams in each discipline. You had to take an exam in wheel throwing and got a grade, your final grade, in wheel throwing as in all other sorts of practices. And you had classes, you know, until the end. Some of us said, this doesn’t make sense to go to these exams and get those grades. … So, we wanted to make a final project, each of us, and some of us did. It was at this point we refused to go to exam. I was part of this group. It was probably the only time it happened, that we refused in protest and didn’t care about the graduation certificate. Because what was the use of it? We wanted rather to concentrate on the specialisation we had chosen.

(Rasmussen)

As explained further in the chapter 10 the strict rules and regulations were due to the school’s position as part of the Copenhagen Technical Schools, administrated by the Ministry of Industry, Business, and Financial Affairs and the political framework for these schools. So, the primary goal for the student’s rebellion was to become an independent school acknowledged at the level of higher education, and move to the Ministry of Culture along with the School of Architecture.
Boycott of final exams and wishes for the curriculum

The boycott of the final exams, both at the textile and the ceramic departments, was driven by the desire to make individual graduation projects instead of the traditional series of disciplinary exams, as explained above by Rasmussen. There was a general desire for more openness to elective courses and individual specialisations. She recalls how the protests spread:

The Danish university students started to make noise, and this spread to us. However, we had already had the discussions about our wish to change the teaching, especially so it would not be split so tightly into disciplines. We wanted the educational programme to be a bit more open to choosing directions. Perhaps in third year, where you would choose, if you wanted to get educated in a more industrial or a more artistic direction. I myself was very interested in ceramics for buildings, and this was the direction I would have taken if I had the opportunity for that. It was this kind of thought and ideas, we had.

(Rasmussen)

Instead of taking the classes of all the disciplines to prepare for the exam, she chose, along with two fellow students of ceramics, to embark on her own graduation project – a ceramic building decoration:

... I made a proposal for a decoration to the Panum Institute of Medicine that was under construction at that time. It demanded all my energy, and I was pleased with that. Kjærgaard [the head of the department of ceramics] was furious because it meant that I didn’t come to the classes in chemistry or all the other stuff. I did not come because I had to work on the decoration project, and I did complete it. And then we exhibited our projects. To my great triumph I even got the silver medal from the Schools of the Technical Society. This was a triumph because Kjærgaard was so furious at me as I joined the rebels and refused to take the final exams. It was a defeat for the school if you didn’t want your graduation.

(Rasmussen)

Most Danish newspapers only mentioned the boycott at the textile department, however. The protesting students from Textile were expelled from the school, so this might be the reason for the omission of the ceramic students, as they seem not to have been expelled (Information 1969). Sandorff explains the situation at the textile department in detail, where five protested and chose to make individual graduation projects:

We were nine in the class and four who completed, which also contributed to a certain division in the class. And you were not self-assured either. I was weaving on a carpet, and halfway through the work, I was not allowed to appear at the school. But we went anyway, and Gjerløv-Knudsen [the principal] walked by and said: ‘I do not see you.’ But this was at the same time that the other students were attending the exam. So clearly some discussions arose, and it also gave a feeling, both ways, of a kind of betrayal or failure.

(Sandorff)
The desire for individual choices and specialisation did not only relate to the final exams but also to earlier activities during the course. Rasmussen explains how they wanted to be able to pick subjects and even take courses at the Royal Academy schools of either architecture or pictorial arts.

What we wanted was, as students at the School of Arts and Craft or the Academy, to be able to pick a subject and then, for example, go to the School of Architecture some months or half a year, if you had chosen a line where you thought it was exciting to study your subject elsewhere. You know, I was interested in this myself, because I thought, it was exciting to work across arts and crafts and architecture. This has always been of enormous interest to me, and I would have had tremendous benefit from being at the School of Architecture. We did, in fact, go to some lectures there.

(Rasmussen)

All three participants followed the direction they chose individually at the school in their later career. We asked if it mattered that they graduated without a diploma, and Sandorff answered:

No, and it never has. ... I was aiming to be a designer and thought ‘I need to make a living from this’. So, I happily and calmly took my portfolio of things and walked down to Cotil, which at the time was a reasonably good design firm, and I was admitted and got off to a fantastic, privileged start, where I got into the Cotil interior collection together with Børge Mogensen, Lis Ahlmann, Bent Salicath, Vibeke Klint and various, also Kim Naver was a part of it. So, it was a somewhat privileged start I got, and it was probably also a bit like: ‘I will show you that I can do well without it’. I have never been asked about it, and actually, I went to Mr Hornby [the director of the Technical School] after a few years and got him to make a paper saying: ‘It is hereby confirmed that Mrs Birte Sandorff – I had gotten married – has been a student at the School of Arts and Crafts and Industrial Arts – it was not the name it had among us – in the department of textile printing and weaving: the textile school in the years from 1965 to 1969.’

(Sandorff)

So, later on she acquired documentation of her education, but was never asked for her final grades by any employers. As described further in the next chapter, the School of Arts and Crafts in 1973 became independent from the Technical Schools, now under the name School of Applied Arts. Graduation projects were introduced and grading was abolished.

**Inspiration and critique?**

All three participants refer to the international student rebellion and other kinds of protesting in the period as inspiration for the local actions at the School of Arts and Crafts. They focus, however, mostly on their wish for improvement of their own education and do not refer much to the more general societal critique or political activism we know of from these years. When we asked if a critique of the consumer
society within design and crafts was prevailing at the school back then, Sandorff answered:

No, I don’t think so, it came gradually because it is something which is followed by becoming more politically aware of the structure in society, and we were not so aware in my recollection. It was very much about something looking good, that was just how it was. Something significant also happened in the ’70s, where one turns to the industry and operates much more with independent art. It kind of happened in our class where I chose the industrial strand. I think I did it because I had been in apprenticeship and experienced those who lived poorly and were underpaid and worked on hand-woven fabrics by the metre for *Den Permanente*, which could have been woven just as well industrially. I believed it was foolish and I wanted to be making a living from it. It was a must for me, I did not want to be working for such a starvation wage, as I had experienced. But, well, Kirsten went the more experimental, free path, and she did that already in her education.

(Sandorff)

Sandorff recalls how Dehlholm worked at the school with dyeing heavy ropes for textile sculptures, ‘so the entire kitchen was coloured’, and that her work to a great extent was very inspired by artistic movements in Poland and other East European countries (Sandorff) (Figure 9.2).

Despite the joint efforts of protest actions and the general rebellious atmosphere of the time, they wanted individual freedom the most and took different tracks. As described by Sandorff, Dehlholm took a much more artistic track, and central to her engagement was a frustration with the low status of arts and crafts in the hierarchy of independent art forms. When we asked Dehlholm about the engagement in societal critique on a more general level, she only refers to a critique of the juried art exhibitions, for example, the Charlottenborg exhibitions in Copenhagen, where her textile works were judged as works of arts and crafts, not as experimental art works.

So, when I submitted something made in textile materials, it came to the arts and crafts jury, and I rebelled against it. It was more in the arts. I was not so politically rebellious. ... it was centred around the arts. It was the fact that it was not an art education; it was an arts and crafts education – and it bothered me a lot. And concerning that point of view, Franka [Rasmussen, form teacher at the textile department] was entirely on my side; she was an artist herself.

(Dehlholm)

When we asked Rasmussen whether criticism of society and the societal relevance of the education played a role in the discussions at the school, she also answered that she didn’t think they thought much of these aspects beyond the school.

Not really. It was, as I recall, not so much what came after the education or what to use it for we had in mind. This wasn’t really what we were occupied with. It was rather the content of the teaching we thought was important to get improved. Of course, this was also about being able to get along afterwards, but I don’t recall the issue of how to make a living when you were finished. It was no central issue.

(Rasmussen)
Figure 9.2 Textile installation by Kirsten Dehlholm, here together with her partner Otto Sigvaldi at the exhibition *Experimentell Nordisk Textil*, Röhsska Museum, Gothenburg 1970.
While Sandorff had more thoughts on how to get a living as a designer, Dehlholm and Rasmussen were more focused on the freedom of choice and individual, artistic development. There were close contacts to the more politically engaged student movements at the School of Architecture and Danish universities, and societal issues were on the agenda of the debates arranged by Dehlholm in March 1969. Rasmussen confirms that the societal issues were part of the rebellion, as at the other educational institutions, but believes they played a minor role at the School of Arts and Crafts:

Well, this was also partly the case with us, but in my memory, it was mostly about the craving to learn all that which wasn't available. There might have been some discussion, I didn't notice, about those kinds of issues. Well, there was societal engagement, of course. I remember mostly, however, issues about Bauhaus and the craftspeople being flushed out by the manufacturing industry’s focus on machines, so the crafts should just get out of the way.

(Rasmussen)

Our three interviews show their value in the diverging expressions of interests in the student rebellion. There were, of course, very different interests and understandings at the school, and only some of the students took active part in the boycott. The three different versions here align with the trajectories of their later careers in, respectively, textile design, experimental performance theatre and studio ceramics. Their memories of the distant events and discussion might, however, partly have been shaped by this alignment, as they look back on a long and successful professional career. In this way, such oral testimonies cannot stand alone as historical evidence, and further sources are discussed in Chapter 10 on debates and reforms at the Danish design schools.

The most puzzling aspect of the interviews is the question of the role and level of political engagement and societal critique. All three participants tone down the many external agendas of protest, despite being active in the boycott and having a personal risk in their involvement, so they must have felt a strong motivation. Was this motivation only for improvement of the education and opportunities for individual specialisation, as they all emphasise? Or could there be a general bias to forget or tone down ideological involvement, when you look back on your own development as a young professional? When we look back at the history of protest movements and debate in the late 1960s and 1970s, political activism and societal critiques seem to play a crucial role, because this has been discussed so fiercely afterwards. Both collective memories and history writing on this period might also be too focused on this, so we should listen carefully to the individual recollections of our participants. The tight organisation of political movements and fixed ideological agendas had only begun in 1969 at the major educational institutions, and situations as well as agendas changed rapidly and radically across different contexts during the years around 1970, as Chapter 10 shows.

Interviews


References