

“My Dad is an Artist 2012”

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article;
the artist in conversation
with the artist

I never recognized my father as an artist, neither did I recognize him as not being one. I always knew he had made sculptures, as some of them were standing in our living room during my childhood. I remember I hanged a poster of his in my teenage bedroom and how fond I was of it. When realizing the project this spring I found an image of him, from before I was born, and the exact poster was hanging in background.

“Here we go”, my dad says in English, he’s aware I intended a last interview with him before leaving Copenhagen to edit the process we’ve just been through the past month. I recorded this interview as to squeeze the last out of a lemon. The method of recording our conversations was central in our collaboration, even though I only used this last interview in the actual installation.

During one month we worked in Copenhagen. We met almost every day after he finished his day job. We went to museums and galleries, recorded our thoughts and ideas about the shows - it was done in the style of a real interview. I turned on my recorder and started the conversation by stating the name and place of the show and then we talked ‘freely’ but controlled about the exhibition. We both knew this was not the work but we felt obligated to record as much of this collaboration as possible, in order to say we did it. But we were not fully aware that the process was the work until a month

after I left Copenhagen.

Every day was a struggle to produce more work and to get beyond and further of what was possible. He stayed calm while I was disappointed by our lacking development when I couldn't see the red thread in the project. One day I asked him to show me his new ideas, and to draw them for me. He had three new sculptures on his mind and I was surprised he didn't have more. For me his productivity was set in my level of productivity and I expected he would have at least 5-6 new sculptures to make. I told him this and he surprisingly laughed at me and said it was beyond of what he could do in such a short time. But embarrassed he asked me if I really expected this. For him making (art)work has always been a long process. From drawing to a scale model until the real sculpture. To produce work takes time and he appreciates the process. A thing I wondered about is the fact he never seems fully satisfied with the result.

He told me, when he finished one of his new wooden sculptures, if he would make it for real it would be different. He didn't know in what way, maybe bigger or just slightly different. He was not able to answer how. I guess this has something to do with the appreciation of the process of a work. But will he ever really finish an artwork? If he constantly thinks it's not finished, will it then ever? Though the things he produced in the 1980s are looked upon as finished artworks.

The time healed the nervous attention regarding the works that I feel he has towards what he made in our

collaboration. I demanded him to make new works, maybe this is the interfering factor. He fully developed and executed the new sculptures the way he wanted them. I tried to interfere as little as possible, but as our relation is strong, he knew when I was skeptic and maybe he changed the idea a bit. The same goes for my work, he keeps quiet when he dislikes aspects of my work and then I know I need to change it. This is the core of our collaboration; the constant feedback, even without words.

Sara: *“It would have been nice if we could have set up the sculptures and talked about them. Now you didn’t look at them for a month, it could be nice for you to see them again, now you didn’t work with them.”*

Dad: *“No, not with them.”*

Sara: *“Oh, so with new once?”*

I’m surprised and sarcastic.

He answers; *“no, not more works I can put in the basement.”* He explains a new sculpture he wants to make for an outdoor exhibition he can participate in this summer. A work I want to execute with him, even though he doesn’t know yet. For him to be able to make it has no future. He enthusiastically talks about the idea and I feel he believes in it while explaining. But he ends with no possibility of making it as it’s too expensive and it’s probably not going to be seen by anybody, so why make it. Just when he has stated this he reminds me that for him, to produce work is only for himself. He knows it would be more pleasing to show it, but in the end it’s more for him. I ask him if this is

true and he laughs and tells me, that is why his ideas have been kept on paper all these years. He doesn't expect his works to make a big influence on the audience. For him the artwork is better if it silently can influence some. His sculptures are simplistic and there is the strength of them. I constantly questioned his motives of making the works and in which way he made them. I expected him to be able to answer every little detail, as this is how I tend to work. Most of the time he was not able to answer and I furiously said he needed to know these things. In the end I questioned if my way of working is better than his and I adapted his way when finishing up the installation just before the end exam exhibition opened its doors.

Along the way it occurred to me that the process of the collaboration was the work. His role was as the actor and my role was the curator of his actions. I was confused where all of this led too and if it was going to end as my final work at all. After I left Copenhagen I didn't talk to him for two weeks. I was so unsure of what to do with all the material we had created together and I knew I had to handle the material on my own, in order to distance myself to regard him as the artist. After these weeks we took up Skyping and every other night we talked about my process and he listened carefully and tried to see himself as the artist. I don't know if he ever felt like the artist, not even now after the end exam has passed and the work exists on its own.

“How much do you feel a part of this collaboration?”

He hesitates and laughs. He feels part of the collaboration as he is making something along with me, but he realizes and agrees that I need to process the things we did together in order for it to become what it became.

At one point I asked him what would happen if I simply exhibited his sculptures as the final work, with nothing else to support it. How would he feel about that? He answered this question with shrugging his shoulders and I saw he would find it weird and not satisfying. He doesn't want to display his sculptures and putting himself on the pedestal as being the artist. For my dad the actual sculpture is so carefully worked through that he could have produced it several times. When it's there and done, it should feel as the finished product, but he doubts it every time.

Through the conversation he says the finished sculpture is the correct one, but still he would have made it different. I wasn't confused about his double tendencies because I recognized them in my way of working. As much as possible I tried to question our doubts about what we were doing and this very thing is part of the work.

Sara: *“It seems I just need to grab it and make it, then it's finished. This deadline (e.g. end exam) provides me with something good.”*

Dad: *“It's good to have a deadline.”*

Sara: *“Yes, otherwise I could, no we could just continue this collaboration, and that wouldn't make*

sense at all, because then we are thrown exactly into what you have been doing for many years. There's nobody to say when it stops."

Dad: *"Otherwise it ends like me, where I just have it in me and only draws the ideas on paper and writes a bit about it, but it's never turning into something concrete, because there's no deadline for its publication. It makes it unnecessary. But now it's just a never ending thing I'm doing."*

I called my dad and told him I was going to write an article about our collaboration. I told him I would write about him being an artist, even though I didn't know if he regarded himself like one now:

Dad: *"From what I have given you, I feel like an artist. I don't see myself as more an artist now than I was before. The definition of being an artist is something undefined for me. It is based upon how you think and act, and not only because you're executing a work. To be an artist with you, also contains to be an artist. It's easier to call yourself an artist when you have exhibited something. You don't have to earn money with it. Maybe this is a romantic way to think about yourself, but that's how it is for me. It has always been so vulnerable to call myself an artist without having a diploma on it, that's why I never called myself an artist in public. I couldn't defend my position because I didn't live from it."*

Later I get a text message stating:

"To be an artist is to think, reflect and act from

oneself as a human.” One minute later I receive another one; “*The reflected human is an artist.*” I laugh and in person I would have said to him; that’s too philosophical to hold anything.

One month after exhibiting the work my dad got his own studio in Copenhagen.

Sara Glahn, July 2012

This article was written just after the first showing of “My Dad is an Artist 2012”, the Graduation Show, Gerrit Rietveld Academy.

All images from the installation at the Graduation Show.

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