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Threads - A Mobile Sewing Circle: Making Private Matters Public in Temporary Assemblies

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we propose temporary assemblies where the sharing of stories and concerns are facilitated. Possible challenges and characteristics of such temporary assemblies will be discussed through the project *Threads – a Mobile Sewing Circle*, which is designed in order to support conversations in relation to everyday use of ICT as well as in relation to other means of communication. The participants do not necessarily belong to an already existing community and do not need to reach a consensus. The discussion in this paper will focus on how the design of *Threads* allows and encourages the participants to bring past lived experiences to the table, as well as how the act of participating in the sewing circle brings out new concerns. Despite the transient character of this assembly we will also look at how the things produced in the sewing circle might support longer-lasting, future conversations.

Author Keywords

Participation, assemblies, sewing circle, design experiment

INTRODUCTION

Within participatory design research, and other participatory oriented research, long-term engagement with users as well as other stakeholders outside academia is often advocated. These relationships are usually built up in order to be able to initiate and promote changes based on objectives or concerns, which are well grounded in the intended context of use. In general terms one could say that future users are invited into the design process in order to allow them to have an influence on the design, and consequently the possible changes that it might bring.

Typically these processes have been situated in work contexts, or within organisations, where the future users are already part of a community or at least share a context of use. It is today however not uncommon that design has implications for others than the intended user group and reaches beyond the intended use context.

To some extent this has always been the case. We would however argue that since ICT (Information and Communication Technology) today to a higher extent is being designed for and used in a variety of everyday contexts, which overlap and intermingle, it becomes more difficult to know to whom and how these technologies and artefacts will become a concern.

In this paper we will discuss the collaborative project *Threads – a Mobile Sewing Circle*, which could be described as a *temporary assembly* that is designed in order to facilitate the sharing of stories, experiences and concerns in relation to the everyday use of ICT as well as other means of communication. We call it a temporary assembly as the aim is not necessarily to establish long-term relationships between the participating actors or strive for attaining a shared goal. The aim is rather to gather people belonging to various communities, groups and networks.

In order to discuss possible characteristics and dilemmas of this temporary assembly we will also take a look at other kinds of assemblies such as the 'Thing' (Latour 2005) as well as sewing circles (Waldén 2002) that in different ways gather those concerned, as well as the causes of the concern (Latour 2005).

In the discussion we will focus not only on the role of the participating 'human actors' of this assembly, but also on the 'non-human actors' (Latour 2005) such as mobile phones, threads, needles, and embroidery machines.

More specifically we will focus on how the design of *Threads* allows or encourages the participants to bring past experiences to the table, as well as how the experience of participating in the sewing circle brings out new concerns. Despite the fact that we emphasise the temporality of this assembly we will also consider how the material objects or things produced in the sewing circle might become actors in future conversation beyond the assembly which is limited to a specific time and place.

Threads was initiated under the name *stitching together*, and has been arranged in galleries, museums, festivals and academic contexts. In this paper we will focus on *Threads* as a touring version of the sewing circle, developed in collaboration with the four following partners: Swedish Travelling Exhibitions, Vi Unga (a youth-led organization for leadership, democracy and entrepreneurship), the National Federation of Rural Community Centres and Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan (a national organisation arranging study circles).

During the spring of 2009 we conducted a pilot tour of the project *Threads* to three Rural Community Centres in Sweden: Vemhån, Tyresö and Lane-Ryr. Based on the result of the trial tour we are now preparing an extended tour during the autumn of 2010 and spring of 2011.

THREADS – A MOBILE SEWING CIRCLE

Many of us have text messages in our mobile phones that remind us of people, relationships, and situations that we like, love or even hate. In the sewing circle *Threads* we invite people to embroider an SMS, by hand or with an embroidery machine, and thereby share these fragments of everyday conversations with others. We have chosen to work in the form of a sewing circle because it is a social context based on handicraft as well as sharing of everyday stories, experiences, and concerns.

The specific invitation to this sewing circle to embroider an SMS, is done in order to engage with materials, technologies and practices that are often perceived as oppositional or contradictory. By weaving these together into strange but familiar combinations and constellations we hope to encourage reflection in action on the relation between concepts like private and public, digital and physical, quick and slow, long-lasting and ephemeral, memories and hopes. These are of relevance when it comes to design and use of ICT as well as other means of communication.

Image 1. Embroidery machine connected to a mobile phone.

CHALLENGES WITHIN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

The project *Threads* rests on the democratic values of participatory design in the sense that we aim to engage various stakeholders outside of academia in the production of knowledge.

Within the tradition of participatory design the ambition has been to involve users in the design process in order to allow them to have an influence on the design and consequently the changes the design might bring. Typically methods such as Design Games (Brandt 2006) or Future Workshops (Junk & Mullert 1981) have been used in professional contexts, or within organisations, where the future users are already part of a community or at least share a context of use. It is today, however, not uncommon that design has implications for others than the intended user group and reaches beyond the intended use context. One often mentioned example is SMS, which was designed for businessmen, but today is widely used among the youth. Today we can see various services or genres based or related to SMS, such as SMS Novels, SMS Roulette, and Twitter, which few could have imagined when SMS was introduced.

This shift towards unknown users and usage is partly due to the fact that ICT to a higher extent is being designed for and used in everyday contexts. Today we do not only use these technologies and systems as part of our work, or any other well defined context. Today we use ICT to vote, make our yearly tax declaration, engage in public debate as well as to tell our friends and family that we are fifteen minutes late, have given birth to a child and share pictures from our vacation.

When the user is unknown and cannot be involved in the design process, Ehn argues that designers should 'design for design', which implies a shift from 'design-in-project' to 'design-in-use' (Ehn 2008). In other words, when designers and users are not able to work together in projects the designer should create space for design in the actual use situation (Ehn 2008). In a similar manner Storni argues for an increasingly delegated user (Stomi 2008). Storni refers to technologies and infrastructures, open to being transformed by the users, which in turn enables and are enabled by design practices like 'crowd sourcing', 'open sourcing' and 'technological bricolage'. If we as designers are to take the shift towards a more proactive user seriously, Storni argues that we need to make more profound delegations to the user. This would mean that designers should delegate design choices and design actions, instead of designing artefacts for use.

Both Ehn's and Storni's proposals, could be seen as attempts to maintain the democratic values that participatory oriented design is based on. Despite the fact that designers and users are not always able to work together in projects, these strategies aim to create space for users to have an influence on the design and the changes these designs might bring. One consequence of this shift towards 'design-in-use' and an 'increasingly delegated user' is that designers and users become separated in time and space, which implies that it becomes more difficult to design for stable long-term changes based on jointly expressed objectives. What we see is an ongoing conversation or dialogue in which a variety of actors take part in negotiating possible action spaces, both through design as well as proactive use. One such example is the lingo of Twitter that emerged through use, and later has been adopted by other social media platforms.

In this landscape where design do not only take place in projects but also in use, responsibility is further delegated between various actors, human and non-human. As a consequence it seems to be harder to find one master narrative that distinguishes right from wrong and truth from false. What we see is rather various narratives that compete, complement, or contradict each other. These could be narratives told on the news on television or blogs, but also narratives told through design and use in which the intended or preferred use is redefined. During the closing down of airports and standstill of airborne transport when the ash cloud from the Icelandic volcano hit Northern Europe in 2010, there were competing stories and interests, such as security and economy, expressed in the news, in parliaments, and on blogs.

PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS

While ICT, to some extent, seems to enable more opportunities to engage in public dialogues or debate, for example through blogs or sending SMS to be displayed as a backdrop during a debate on television, it might also be more difficult to navigate in this landscape of sometimes contradicting and conflicting narratives. How are we then able to engage in meaningful public conversations?

Inspired by John Dewey and Walter Lippman, Noortje Marres argues that new technology for communication, transport and production makes public affairs more complex (Marres 2005). As suggested by Marres, the most common argument is that this complexity might lead us to hand over all responsibility to experts, institutions, and elected representatives, as we do not consider the information we have at hand to be fit. Or we could demand more transparent information.

However, instead of considering this complexity as a threat to public conversations Lippman and Dewey propose that complex issues actually enable and encourage public involvement in politics, Marres shows. A concern or issue that can be resolved by experts, institutions or a social community does not become a public affair. In other words, complexity is a condition for public affairs to arise, rather than a threat to the democratic society (Marres 2005).

In a similar manner Bruno Latour argues that "…transparent, unmediated, undisputable facts have recently become rarer and rarer" and that there seems to be no public proofs to rely on (Latour 2005).

What Latour is proposing is not to hold on to the ideals of undisputable matters-of-fact, but rather to embrace the disputable, which would mean to pay attention to the uncertain, complicated, heterogeneous and risky. Latour is thereby arguing for a shift from undisputable 'matters-of-fact' to disputable 'matters-of-concern' (Latour 2005, p. 11).

In order to deal with the disputable, Latour argues that we need to recognize that there are several forms of assemblies, not only parliaments, in which we "… speak, vote, decide, are decided upon, prove, or are convinced. Each has its own architecture, its own technology of speech, its complex set of procedures, its definition of freedom and domination…(Latour 2005, p. 21)."

An early form of an assembly that managed to deal with the disputable is the 'Thing' (Latour 2005). The 'Thing' is a gathering of human and non-human actors in which we "… don't come together because we agree, look alike, feel good, are socially compatible, or wish to fuse together but because we are brought together by diverse matters of concern into some neutral, isolated place in order to come to some provisional makeshift (dis)agreement (Latour 2005, p. 13)."

Rather than proposing one kind of public or assembly, Latour is suggesting an assembly of assemblies, that in various ways manages to gather those concerned, and perhaps those who are not, as well as the causes of the concerns.

As an important part of this assembly of assemblies we are proposing temporary assemblies. These assemblies would not gather because of a preset urgent matter-of-concern, or with an ambition to reach consensus or express one preferred meaning or action space. The concern in these assemblies would rather be to gather people belonging to various communities, networks and groups and to facilitate the ongoing conversations that the everyday life involves: to engage in the sometimes conflicting, contradictory, complementary, and competing narratives told through design and use.

To facilitate these conversations we have made the design choice to host a sewing circle, in which we embroider SMS by hand and with an embroidery machine. In other words, we are not inviting to a blank slate or neutral ground, in which we expect matters-of-concern to arise out of nothing. The participants in this assembly are not only the humans, but also the non-humans, such as fabrics, mobile phones, SMS, needles and an embroidery machine, that in various ways will guide and intervene in the conversations. Some of these things are brought by us, and some by the other participants in the sewing circle.

The fact that we have chosen to assemble in sewing circles might seem odd, as it is a social gathering that can be associated with the private sphere, gossip and leisure. As will be shown through past as well as contemporary examples, the sewing circle and other communities and networks that are based on handicraft, are assemblies that are closely entangled with both private and public conversations.

MAKING THINGS PUBLIC IN SEWING CIRCLES

Louise Waldén describes the sewing circle not only as a forum in which pleasure is combined with usefulness, but also a forum in which women themselves have been able to set the agenda and therefore discuss issues that they consider important. Waldén argues that the sewing circle is an example of what she would call a 'hidden female public', or a 'shadow parliament'. In order to understand the characteristics of this 'hidden female public', it might help to take a look at the Swedish word for sewing circle: "syjunta". Junta comes from the Latin junctus, which means joined. She points out that there are two words in the Swedish language that uses junta: 'militärjunta' (the military junta) and 'syjunta' (sewing circle), which both are groups based on 'the principle of the closed group' as a condition of absolute openness. It rests on confidence that must not be broken, and is built up over time (Waldén 2002).

Today we can see new forms of communities based on handicraft which move out of a domestic setting and into cafés, bars and squares. As these communities in a rather explicit manner are moving into and acting in public places, they are no longer the kind of hidden public that Waldén is talking about.

Stella Minahan and Julie Wolfram Cox characterise the global movement, often called *Stitch 'n Bitch*, as groups that often operate in both physical and digital public spheres. "We propose that *Stitch 'n Bitch* may be an example of a new way of connecting that is based on

material production using traditional craft skills and yarns as well as the optical fibre and twisted pair cable used for telecommunications (Minahan 2007, p. 6)."

We should however not interpret this movement as based on one unanimous agenda. Instead, Minahan and Wolfram Cox, point out a number of themes - remedial, progressive, resistance, nostalgia and irony - which highlight various aspects and approaches that can be discerned in the *Stitch 'n Bitch* movement. What they have in common is that they have an interest in handicraft and that they act in both digital and physical publics.

Minahan and Wolfram Cox also point out that far from everybody are able to or have an interest in participating in the *Stitch 'n Bitch* movement. While "… crafts such as stitching and embroidery may be a positive and social occupation for many, there are still far too many women around the world who are required to work at these tasks for poor pay rates and in difficult conditions (Minahan 2007, p. 15)." These women are not included in the *Stitch 'n Bitch* movement, partly due to the digital divide, and partly because craft in this context is not related to nostalgia or activism, but rather a necessity that brings income to the household or lower costs.

These examples show that handicraft and ICT are assigned various values and meanings in different contexts. It is also clear that different forms of communities based on handicraft and social media include and exclude various actors and use more or less explicit strategies to engage in public conversations.

The sewing circle *Threads* has several similarities with the kind of sewing circle that Waldén is discussing. Perhaps the most important similarity is the recognition and sharing of personal and lived experiences as important. Another important characteristic of the sewing circle is its slowness, which is closely connected to the materials and practices of handicraft.

Threads is, however, not based on the principle of the closed group and there are no demands for long-term engagement. Since there are few possibilities within the framework of the project to build up trust over time through recurring gatherings, there is a risk that there can be no 'absolute openness' which Waldén talks about.

We are however not interested in developing that particular form of hidden public. Our aim is rather to explore and develop knowledge on how to facilitate assemblies, which consists of meetings between people who are not already part of the same community. As we have chosen to stage *Threads* in semi public contexts, we are to some extent closely linked to the *Stitch 'n Bitch* movement, which acts and engages both in physical and digital publics. This shift in how the sewing circle is practiced could be described as a blurring of the boundaries when it comes to time, place as well as its participants.

MAKING PROPOSITIONS THROUGH DESIGN EXPERIMENTS

To explore possible characteristics and dilemmas in relation to temporary assemblies we have chosen to conduct design experiments, in which we invite others to participate and engage in conversations with other actors. In an iterative process we are now further developing the design of *Threads* based on the participants engagements during the pilot tour described in this paper.

In the article "Lab, Field, Gallery and Beyond" Koskinen, Binder and Redström describe three contexts for design experiments: the lab which is related to the natural sciences, the field related to social sciences, and the gallery (Koskinen 2008). The gallery is described as a context that is intended for communicating knowledge, which in turn means that other actors, such as future users, are not invited in the process of knowledge production. To exhibit design in galleries can still be an interesting strategy as it allows us to propose possible futures that lie beyond the directly applicable. In other words, the gallery as context creates space for us to imagine new futures that are not necessarily desired or feasible given today's conditions, but helps us imagine how things could be different. For better or worse. However, this strategy might loose one of the strengths of design: to be used and thereby become an actor in peoples' everyday life.

As mentioned earlier, we have previously staged this sewing circle in various contexts ranging from galleries, museums, festivals, squares and academic contexts. On several occasions we have also been invited to exhibit only a patchwork quilt made out of embroidered text messages that usually travels with the sewing circle. As the quilt is exhibited it becomes a representation of a process, but appears fixed and finished, and thus loses the qualities that the sewing circle possess. We are here referring to the opportunity to engage in dialogue and to jointly negotiate around meaning and possible action spaces, which is one of the main objectives with the sewing circle.

Our ambition is to make *Threads* a part of a lived experience rather than a distant reflection. We hope to achieve this by facilitating a proposal for a temporary assembly. Rather than exhibiting *Threads* as a finished proposal in a gallery we have chosen to stage this experiment in the context of Rural Community Centres, which to some extent already are part of some of the participants' everyday lives.

The ambition to include various actors in the process also relates to one of the collaborating partners' main interest in this project, which is to design exhibitions that reaches beyond the big cultural institutions and that allows for participation and co-creation. This means that they strive for a shift from the exhibition as one-way communication of pre-packaged experiences, information and knowledge to a more dialogical, empowering and perhaps democratic approach. This is a step away from the Koskinen et al. description of a gallery and a search for a platform that enables a more dialogical approach to knowledge.

ONE DAY AT THE RURAL COMMUNITY CENTRES

During the pilot tour in 2009 each sewing circle lasted between 10 am and 4 pm, either on a Saturday or Sunday, and had a similar arrangement with a group of ten to twenty participants in varying ages. All participants had received an invitation on email or on the phone asking

them to bring their mobile phones and their own textiles, such as towels, pillowcases, t-shirts or other fabrics that they would like to embroider on. The invitation also encouraged them to bring hangings with proverbs since people from previous sewing circles had pointed out resemblances with the embroidered SMS.

Each sewing circle began with an introduction to the project, made by us and one representative from the Swedish Travelling Exhibitions. Material from previous circles acted as support for the introduction in the sense that we could provide concrete examples of SMS embroidery and simultaneously talk about the ideas behind the project.

In the centre of the room we placed a large table with a tablecloth to embroider on. Fabrics, needles and embroidery threads in different colours, were also placed on the table for everyone to gather around. Materials from previous circles were hung on clotheslines in the room. In some cases verandas were also used. On a separate table we placed the embroidery machine connected to a mobile phone that allowed participants to forward one of their messages to the machine and have it embroidered. During the day we had coffee, cake and lunch together.

At the end of the day the participants were left with the decision to either bring the things produced during the day with them, or leave it in the sewing circle, to travel to the next place. Other things left in the sewing circle was a photo album, with images from the day, and embroideries made on the tablecloth.

Each sewing circle ended with a joint discussion in relation to our experiences of the day.

A TEMPORARY ASSEMBLY WITH A PAST AND POSSIBLE FUTURES

Even though *Threads* is a temporary gathering, in the sense that the participants do not necessarily share a past or a future, the assembly as well as the participating actors, humans and non-humans, are not without a past or a future. In this section we will start by giving some examples of how the participants past experiences are brought into the conversations during the sewing circle. Then we will give some examples of how the act of participating in the sewing circle brings out new concerns. We will also discuss how these stories and conversation might continue beyond the sewing circle, which is limited to a specific time and place.

The discussions below are based on the embroidered materials produced by the participants as well as field notes taken by us as we ourselves also participate in the sewing circles. The notes have partly been taken during the sewing circle and partly from recollection later on the same day. Since there have been two of us taking notes we had already from the outset partial perspectives: we listened in on, engaged in and observed different aspects of the sewing circle. When we put the notes together they hopefully became a thicker narrative.

Image 2. The table set in Tyresö

Bringing past experiences to the table

Threads is designed in order to encourage the participants to bring their own previous lived experiences to the table. This is for example done through the sharing of SMS as well as through fabrics that carry stories and memories.

A woman at the Community Centre in Lane-Ryr decides to embroider an SMS that says "Good luck today. Hugs, Vicky " One of the other participants helps her to forward the messages to the embroidery machine. She says that it means a lot to her. It is an SMS that she got from a friend when she was on her way to take a computer course as part of her work. The course had been cancelled several times, which had made her nervous. She explains that she had difficulties keeping up with the fast pace. This time there had been a new student in the class, who already knew how to work with computers and immediately made friends with the teacher. As the new student and the teacher chatted, the other students had more time for themselves and to help each other. This meant that they became less anxious and when she went home she felt that she had overcome a threshold, where she could learn more by herself. She says that she will frame the SMS-embroidery and put it up in her office.

- Now I can also tell my boss that I embroidered an SMS. Maybe I will lie a bit and say that I was able to forward the message myself to the machine. This summer I will buy a new mobile phone and learn how it works. I need to be able to use SMS as part of my work. Now I don't bother as it takes too much time. And it's so awkward.

Later she adds:

- I think the embroidery will create more discussion and conversation than a traditional hanging. Partly because I will talk about my experience, with the embroidery as a starting point. It also refers to something that many at work have experienced.

On several occasions the participants have brought their own textiles to embroider on, or embroidered hangings with proverbs to show the other participants. Like the digital text messages that people bring in mobile phones, the textiles and embroideries also have memories and stories connected to them that often are brought up during the conversations.

In Vemhån several of the participants brought hangings with proverbs on them, to show and share with the others. As we are looking through some of their embroideries one of the women recalls a saying that she did not bring, but that she finds to be representative for the values very much present when she was growing up in the village.

"Den fåfängt går, han lärer mycket ont."

It says that if you are idle and not do useful things you will learn to be mischievous. When she was growing up in a village close by she always used to have a handicraft in her hand. She would not even leave her handicraft behind as she went to visit the neighbouring farm. When she learned how to read, she did so with her hands occupied with handicrafts such as knitting or other things that would allow her to keep her eyes on the text. Later another woman in her 50's mentions that she also do handicraft, not while reading, but while watching TV with her husband. She explains that it relaxes her, as she some times feels like she is wasting her time if she is only watching TV. One of the teenage girls supports that idea:

- It's fun to embroider. One doesn't just watch TV, but do something meanwhile.

This example shows how one proverb provoked several of the participants to share their own previous experiences that in different ways relate to the values embedded in the saying.

It is however not only the things that the participants themselves bring that support bringing lived experiences into the conversations, but also the idea of a sewing circle.

One woman in Tyresö says that she used to be part of a sewing circle, that had become more like a competition of who would make the best food and serve the nicest wine. It became more of a competition than an opportunity for exchange where you would feel comfortable asking for help. Not the openness that Waldén talks about, but more of the demeaning connotations of sewing circles as a place for gossip and showing off.

A young girl replies that she likes to sit at home on Friday evenings to do handicraft. As she does not like to be by herself she has invited friends to come along. In the beginning it was only girls, but now there are some guys as well.

Experiences and situations in the sewing circle trigger conversations

As mentioned above the stories and concerns shared during the sewing circle are not only related to previous experiences but also on the act of participating in *Threads*. During the day different situations and experiences of participating in the sewing circle become a concern that triggers and provoke conversations.

The sun was shining in Tyresö so we decide to sit outside on the porch to embroider. A girl has one headphone in one ear and follows the conversation with the other. For long periods we are silent, but still gathered as a group, all doing our own embroideries. After some time we start to talk about being quiet, and that we usually are afraid of being quiet, especially with a group of people that you do not know very well.

After a while a woman says:

- Usually it helps to keep your hands occupied. It can be with embroidery, but it can also be with a mobile phone. If I'm alone somewhere, perhaps waiting for someone I usually take out my mobile phone just to look busy.

During the day the aspect of time keeps on coming up in the discussion. At the end of the day one girl says that what she appreciated most with the day was the long conversations:

- It was nice to just listen and to be quiet. You don't have to say everything in five minutes.

- I never thought of SMS as short stories before, a boy adds.

- As we were gathered for a whole day there was time to get to know a bit more about other people's lives. If it would have been a shorter period I would most likely just have talked to my friends, another girl replies.

Through this last remark the girl was stating that we had become a group, even though a temporary one, that extended previous relations.

While the aspect of time was in focus in Tyresö, the embroidery machine in relation to the hand became a recurring topic during in Lane-Ryr. Several of the participants had prepared themselves by gathering proverbs and sayings from friends and the Internet. During the day these are shared among the participants and embroidered both by hand and through the embroidery machine. At the end of the day a woman said:

- Today we have supported the telephone operator.

Her comment shows how the design, to forward an SMS from the phone to the embroidery machine, was more of an obstacle if you wanted to embroider something other than an SMS. Since the majority chose to embroider proverbs instead of a personal message already in the mobile phone the interface did not make sense and was first and foremost costly.

The same day a woman uses a technique called Japanese Embroidery, which is usually used for making motives to be framed and hung on the wall, to embroider on the white tablecloth. Another woman makes a comment:

- It will not hold if you wash it.

- I guess I will have to make it all over after every wash, she replies.

- It will be wasted women power, says another and laughs.

Later the same day there is a vivid discussion on the low pricing on handicrafts sold in stores close by. They talk about all the energy and skills that are invested in making a traditional dress (national costume). One woman questions that these dresses have to be made entirely by hand.

- If they had machines back then, they would have used them, so why make it by hand now when we have the machines?

At lunch, the embroidery machine starts to sound strange, so we turn it off. The fabric has jumped out of the frame. As we turn it on again we realize that one letter is missing and the rest of the text become a bit crooked. We offer to reverse the machine and correct the error, but the woman who sent the message blurs the boundaries between human and technological error and says:

- It doesn't matter. I will tell the person who sent it that he spelled wrong. That usually happens when you write SMS anyway.

Possible future conversations
By the end of the day the participants can choose whether they want to bring their message home or leave it in the sewing circle. On several occasions participants embroider on things, such as towels, pillowcases, t-shirts and even shoes that could be used in the future, and thereby possibly become part of new conversations and relations.

Image 3. My pink pillow with my son's text messages from maternity hospital was made into a pillow with an image of my grandchild on it. I have printed the images myself and ironed them onto the fabric. Now the pillow is used during nursing. (Excerpt from email sent to us by the woman who does not want her name to be disclosed)

A woman in Lane-Ryr explains that she will make her embroidery into a gift to her son and his newborn child. She embroiders a text message that she received from the hospital when the child was born, onto a pillow that already has travelled between generations and already has other embroideries on it.

- I will redo it so that the size will fit a baby. I think my son will like the embroidered SMS, since he works with computers, she adds.

Others make their embroidered SMS into hangings to be displayed and put up on a wall. As mentioned, one woman said that she would put her embroidery in her office space, and hoped that it would trigger conversations in relation to computer courses that they are expected to take at work.

Because of the temporary characteristic of the assembly we know little about the lives of these embroideries and the possible conversations and relations they become part of beyond the sewing circle. As there are few possibilities

within the framework of the project to get back to each other these are stories and conversations left to our imagination.

In other cases the participants choose to leave their messages behind to include it as a possible actor in future sewing circles. As the messages are left in the sewing circle, they do to some extent get out of context, since the person who made the embroidery and knows the story of it and why it was embroidered is not there anymore. It is then up to the reader to make sense of, or interpret the message based on their own experiences.

Image 4. Despite never meeting, participants in the sewing circle, has had a conversation and negotiation enabled by one of the non-human actors; the tablecloth.

Over the course of sewing circles we noticed a conversation that had developed in the tablecloth. Somebody had embroidered, with quite inexperienced hand, "hel vet", which was associated to "hell". A couple of elderly ladies in Vemhån find it inappropriate to have a swearword written so publicly. They add letters with their skilled hands so that it turns out as "hel vetelängd", "whole pastry". It became a conversation in the material, and the tablecloth became a non-human actor where a negotiation took place of what is ok to show publicly.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION
In this paper we have suggested a landscape in which design does not only take place within design projects but also through use (Ehn 2008; Stomi 2008). As designers are not always able to work together with users in projects, responsibility is distributed to various actors, which in turn means that it become more difficult to hold on to the ideals of designing based on commonly articulated objectives.

As an important part of this landscape in which complementary, competing, conflicting and contradictory narratives told through design as well as proactive use, we are suggesting temporary assemblies.

It should be mentioned that we are not proposing that temporary assemblies should replace other kinds of assemblies that are based on long-term engagement and expressing commonly defined objectives. They should rather be seen as part of an assembly of assemblies in which each, as argued by Latour, will have its own

architecture, technology of speech, and ways to gather those concerned as well as the causes of the concerns.

As mentioned, *Threads* is a collaboration where three of the five partners have local affiliation. Thereby the project has a potential of becoming part of the local infrastructures of these organisations that can support longer relationships than the sewing circle in itself can. This is however not the main focus of this paper.

In order to explore and develop knowledge on how to facilitate temporary assemblies we have chosen to conduct design experiments, in which we invite others to participate. The aim has not been to make a general definition, but to explore and discuss possible characteristics and dilemmas through the collaborative project *Threads – a Mobile Sewing Circle.*

What characterises *Threads* is that it aims to assemble people who do not necessarily belong to an already existing community or network and that the matters-of-concerns are not set in advance. In other words, *Threads* is not, like the sewing circles described by Waldén, based on a closed group in which trust is built up over time and in which the members share a common history. And, it is not an assembly, like the 'Thing' proposed by Latour, in which we gather because of an urgent public affair that cannot be solved by experts, institutions, elected representatives, or social communities. What we are proposing is assemblies that manage to facilitate conversations in relation to everyday concerns despite the fact that the participants do neither necessarily share a common history, as often is the case in sewing circles, nor gather because of an urgent and common matter-of-concern as in the 'Thing'.

Some of the participants in *Threads* are likely to know each other from before and belong to the same groups, communities and networks. Some will probably also share the same concerns. Still, the challenge in this context, and other temporary assemblies, become a question of how to encourage the participants to bring their own previous experiences and possible concerns to the table, to see how they relate to what the other participants bring and have to say about it, as well as creating space for possible shared experiences and concerns.

This does not mean that we design from nowhere or invite to a blank slate or neutral ground in which we expect matters-of-concern to arise out of nothing. Rather the opposite, we invite to something quite specific – to embroider an SMS stored in the participants' mobile phones and thereby share something personal and private with the other participants of this temporary gathering.

As Lucy Suchman argues, we are always designing from somewhere. Based on Donna Haraway's ideas of situated knowledge, she claims that "… the fact that our knowing is relative to and limited by our locations does not in any sense relieve us of responsibility for it (Suchman 2002, p.96)." What Suchman is arguing for is located accountability, which means to acknowledge that since our vision of the world is a vision from somewhere we are also personally responsible.

In *Threads* we have set the table in order to pose questions in relation to everyday communication, public as well as private. We are inviting to gather around a table, that is filled with materials and artefacts to be used as a starting point for discussion. During the sewing circle the table, that we have set, can be further filled with stories, memories, hopes and concerns that the participants bring with them.

The reason to assemble in the shape of a sewing circle is partly because the sewing circle is a gathering in which personal and lived experiences are recognised as valuable and important. In the sewing circle there are no claims of objective truths, in the sense of instrumental rationality. It is not possible to play what Haraway would call the 'god-trick', "… seeing everything from nowhere (Haraway 1991, p.189)." Instead focus lies on the partial perspectives, and the possible new insight or openings that might come out of allowing these partial perspectives to assemble (Haraway 1991).

Waldén describes craft as an alibi for gathering in the sewing circle. Our focus is however not on craft and sewing circles as a cover story, but rather on how our invitation to embroider an SMS becomes a condition for certain concerns to be brought up. Some of these are based on previous experiences and some are based on participating in *Threads*.

Previous experiences and concerns are first and foremost brought into the conversations through engaging with the artefacts and things, such as SMS and fabrics, brought by the participants themselves. Even though we do not come to final decisions as a group as in the Thing, there are many decisions made by the participants in *Threads*. Through the act of choosing which SMS to embroider and which fabric to use, stories connected and related to these things are brought up. In Lane-Ryr one short message encouraged a woman to share the experience of taking mandatory computer course as part of her work. In some cases the setting of the sewing circle also support or provoke the participants to share previous experiences with the others.

In addition, the act of sharing these personal experiences, and the way in which it is done, also trigger reflection and conversations. In Tyresö the silence and long conversations that the sewing circle enabled was put in relation to the short SMS. And, in Lane-Ryr the authenticity of handicraft was compared with the embroidery machine. In contrast to the memories and previous experiences that are brought into the conversations these are jointly experienced concerns, partly allowing the participants to create a temporary but shared history.

Within the framework of the project there are no demands for long-term engagement. This does, however, not mean that the assembly has no future. As the things produced in the sewing circle travels with the participants, they might become part of new conversations and relations. As most things produced are everyday use objects, such as towels, pillowcases, t-shirts and so on, they will most likely stay within what we might consider everyday situation. As shown in the examples, one woman made her

embroidered message into a gift to her newborn grandchild, and another woman made hers into a hanging to be placed in her office.

In the above mentioned examples the messages are returned to the contexts and relations which they were originally part of. So far these have been everyday situations, which are more or less private, or at least does not involve a greater public. These are perhaps also the contexts in which they are of greatest relevance. Or at least, if compared to the embroidered messages left in the sewing circle, the messages that return to the contexts and relations which they were once part of, are of relevance as they relate to a shared experience, as pointed out by a woman in Lane-Ryr.

As there are few possibilities within the framework of the project to reconnect, we know little about what happens with the things produced when they leave the sewing circle. Possible new conversations, and relations that these things might become part of are stories left to our imagination. As the focus of the temporary assembly is not to facilitate long-term relations or change, this is to some extent unavoidable. The inevitability to grasp the 'whole' story is a dilemma that *Threads* share with other temporary assemblies.

Finally it should be mentioned that *Threads* is an exploratory project. The aim is not to argue that hosting sewing circles, in which we embroider SMS, would be a remedy for everything, or that we should replace the parliament with sewing circles. We would however argue that such a project can highlight certain dilemmas and possible characteristics that can be taken further into other situations and contexts. This could be done by researchers, artists or designers, the collaborating organisations as well as by the participants of the sewing circle.

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