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**THE  
ARAM  
GALLERY**

**FOR EXPERIMENTAL OR NEW DESIGN**

U N D E R  
T H E  
A N I M A L  
R O O F

New designs by the OKAY studio collective at the Aram Gallery

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## Federal animals

by *Daniel Charny*

It is an understatement to say that London is a challenging environment for young designers to set up shop. If not crushed by rental or travel costs, simply generating a profit can prove an insurmountable barrier for many an aspiring independent practitioner. But among other things drawn by the first class work produced here and excited by prospects of being noticed by media and clients, more and more designers choose to make London their base.

For those early in their careers a logical step towards launching an independent studio is to team up and share resources with other like-minded individuals.

London's creative ecology has spawned many more and less successful collaborations, joint ventures and groups, in fact this is probably one of its key characteristics.

But the principle of independent designers pooling resources is not a new idea. The history of design has been made rich by such groups, whether their coming together was on ideological, cultural or commercial grounds. While some groups have become legendary and others became springboards for one or two significant individuals, many are long lost and forgotten. What characterises the ones that make a difference? Maybe their content reflects the values of their times or their social fabric is robust enough to withstand turmoil; most often there has been a distinctive aspect to their communication as a group.

In OKAYstudio we see perhaps one of London's more interesting current evolutions in joint working. Heralded by some as the freshest and most promising contemporary design collective working in London today, OKAYstudio, set up in 2006, has spent two years evolving its own type of collaboration. And while the terms collaboration and cross-fertilisation are often used with little follow-through in the actual fabric of the work, the

OKAYstudio gang are thriving from a freedom enabled almost only by collaboration.

They are thriving of course thanks to a mix of high levels of skills, ambitions and energy. But this they share with many London studios; in their case the model is different in that they don't work as a consultancy, and they don't just share a workspace. They use their mutual name as both a media construct (on their website it is quite literally drawn as a machine of which each one of them is a part), and an organisational umbrella that functions like a company. But in a way that enables them to develop solo careers.

In UNDER THE SAME ROOF, the first curated exhibition of OKAYstudio, The Aram Gallery is keen to explore the diversity of the individual work, all new and never seen before, in the context of their federative model. It is interesting to understand how they work together while retaining independent authorship. What is it that they actually share? How do they take decisions? How much are they actively developing their burgeoning identity? What is the impact of the group character on their personal visions?

The group, made up of seven individuals and one duo, today share a studio, a workshop, a very small kitchen, tools and bicycle pumps, nicknames and jargon, healthy competition, unreserved rallying to each others success, proclaimed envies and the odd night out. They also share an

educational background, as they are all graduates from the Royal College of Art Design Products course directed by Ron Arad. But whatever was sparked off in days of student camaraderie has matured and been refined, and they have successfully carried the pluralistic open-minded studio culture from the academic environment into the professional sphere. This not only includes the physical layout of their studio - an open desk formation - but also and more interestingly an 'open sketch-book' culture that encourages mutual critical debate about their work during its delicate development stages and of course in their appetite for collaborations.

What about the work itself? What, if anything, connects the designs that they are producing? With a heady mix of training, practice and interests which include industrial and automotive design, furniture, fine art, set design, illustration and socio-critical design there are currents of influence running between them. They share interests in experimentation, specifically trying out a wide range of materials and production technologies. They share an approach that champions the relationship of details to the core design concept of a particular piece. Much of their work concerns domestic or interior contexts, though not all. Perhaps the most interesting of shared interests is the significance of the social context of the designs. The objects they create all exist to serve, support and in some cases create (in one way or another) a social interaction. So we see a whimsical moment that lifts a persons

spirits on hanging their coat at the end of the day; a contemplative moment as a material changes its solid form into a fluid coat that covers a source of light; a cultural interrogation through a posture training shoe; a new use of wood threading technology to offer users playful control over the height of their furniture. And a vital aspect that OKAYstudio share is their sketchbooks, their discovery through making, the physical experiments that parallel the design drawings which have become very much part of their studio culture, and enable the inputs of one person into another's work.

These are early days though. Most of OKAYstudio members still have other jobs, either freelancing for more established designers or in remnants of jobs from their pre-design career, while they continue to develop their own work. We know this must be difficult to do, but they have intuitively set things in place to help themselves through. The continuity offered by their shared environment works in their favour, allowing a better chance of getting somewhere with personal work and the exhibitions they undertake set deadlines for new work. There's an underlying social understanding that generates a mutually supportive attitude. All their activities are infused with a very constructive informality. They know how to work together in a very small space with a respectful fluidity. They are open to experimenting with collaborations in varying configurations seemingly

without their egos getting in the way. The intensity of this proximity and joint activity means they know each other's strengths and weaknesses. And above all there is a clear feeling that they are proud to be associated with each other.

But what will happen when the phone calls requesting OKAYstudio increase; how will they handle it? Will they start to exist anonymously under the OKAY name, or direct the client to an individual relationship? How would that work? Will they start explaining that they are not exactly a consultancy? Would they direct it to the least busy designer? By rota? By relevant experience? And could they ever move into production of their own eponymous merchandising (as after all the name almost demands it)?

But perhaps the most critical of questions remains whether their joint umbrella will prove to be the hothouse it promises or will it eclipse their personal visions?

For a gallery focused on exploring the way designers think and work, the show UNDER THE SAME ROOF, on which occasion this catalogue is published, is right here at the heart of the matter.

The Aram Gallery thanks all the people who have put their best efforts and support into making the exhibition possible and happening, and hopes that one day we will look back at this as an exhibition that raised that roof.

## Trousers in Socks

by Roberto Feo

I know, the title sounds like a Dr.Seuss story... in fact we could call it an homage.

*Two socks.*

*New socks.*

*Whose socks?*

*Sue's socks.*<sup>1</sup>

In this case they would have to be Oscar's socks.

I believe I noticed Oscar wearing his trousers tucked inside his socks pretty much from the first time we met back in 2004, when he joined, along with most of the other members, of what is now, Okay Studio: Tomas, Peter, Jorre, Mathias, Andrew, Shay, Yael, Hiroko and Jordi, Platform 10, the study group that Daniel Charny and myself run at the Royal College of Art. At the beginning I thought it was probably one of those bicycle things, but, as time went on, I realised that this had no connection with the two-wheeled sport. I then assumed that it was, or it had to be, some kind of fashion statement. It was both weird and cool (like cool things normally are) and, in fact, I believe it did catch up with some of his colleagues. Personally, it just reminded me of one of Oscar's idiosyncrasies.

After graduating, he worked in our studio (El Ultimo Grito) for over a year. One day, chatting over lunch, I found out, by chance, how this 'trousers in socks' thing had started. He explained, that he begun to wear them in this way to prevent his trousers from touching the floor, especially, when going to bars and clubs, where the toilet floors were consistently wet, soiled and stinky. I guess he then 'developed a taste for it' and had worn them like that at all times, becoming part of his persona.

For me knowing this bit of information changed completely the way I understood it, in one second it transformed itself

from the purely anecdotal into a classic piece of DIY.

Bricolage (DIY) –according to anthropologists and the 'Nouveau Petit Robert' (which is not nouveau, let alone petit, but has the reputation of being a good dictionary) was a: Travail dont la technique est improvisée, adptée aux matériaux, aux circonstances. Meaning: work realised with improvised techniques, adapting to certain given materials and circumstances. That 'bricolage' in French, also means botch should not come as a surprise, more so, if we take into account, that it was precisely in France where all the mothers of all of the world's 'Academias', were born. And what is an Academia if not a way of inventing, sanctioning, institutionalising and fossilising the canon, the one that, from now on, will be the only and unquestionable measure of 'good taste'?

Similarly, we could agree, that tucking your trousers inside your socks, although useful, it is hardly elegant or for that matter tasteful, if not weird and geeky. So much so, that even in a city like London, home to all fashions, it still catches your eye. It feels strange because you can see, frozen, the freshness of the moment, the gesture of the improvised technique and its remnant functionality. It enjoys a distinct aesthetic value, honest and personal, coming from the confidence of a designer who claims ownership of his own idea, without nostalgia and complete disregard for the accepted norm.

All right, here's a useful lesson for you... Give up. Just quit. Because in this life, you can't win. Yeah, you can try, but in the end, you're just gonna lose, big time, because the world is run by The Man...

Oh, you don't know The Man? Well, he's everywhere. In the White House, down the hall. Miss Mullins (referring to the school's head mistress), she's The Man. And The Man ruined the ozone, and he's burning down the Amazon, and he kidnapped Shamu and put her in a chlorine tank!

There used to be a way to stick it to The Man. It was called ROCK AND ROLL. But guess what. Oh, no! The Man ruined that too with a little thing called MTV!

So don't waste your time trying to make anything cool or pure or awesome. The Man's just gonna call you a fat, washed-up loser and crush your soul.

*...but we must, what's time for anyway?*<sup>2</sup>

Over the last months I have come to think of 'Trousers in Socks' as a very concise design manifesto. Open to interpretation, like all concise things, of course, but which perfectly exemplifies the argument for the demystification of design. As Walter Benjamin argues in 'Author as Producer', it is not the content of culture (the work of art or design) that makes it radical, as it is clear that it is easily assimilated when presented within the context of high art, or entertainment. For him truly radical

culture, had to challenge and eliminate the line between the producer and consumer by encouraging everyone to create. We could say: design.

When Oscar asked me to contribute to this catalogue, I knew that I had to talk about 'Trousers in Socks'. Not because I think it's a sweet anecdote (and you will see him around so you can get the story first hand) or because it is probably his first piece of design. But because it symbolizes an approach to design which is very relevant today, on these times of design nonsense.

*Because, what's the point of freedom of speech if you have nothing to say?*<sup>3</sup>

Maybe this is a good occasion to launch a new movement... (or is it an old one? Does it really matter?)

Pull up your socks! (It's now a statement! But also useful, remember?) Don't comply. Invent. Use art. Make change. Keep rocking!

<sup>1</sup> From *Fox in Socks* by Dr. Seuss

*Le Nouveau Petit Robert*

*Cultural Resistance Reader* by Stephen Duncombe

*Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* edited by

Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings

*The Savage Mind* by Claude Levi-Strauss

<sup>2</sup> From *School of Rock* directed by Richard

Linklater and screenplay by Josh White

<sup>3</sup> From *Kingdom Come* by J.G Ballard

## The working life of OKAYstudio

by Hugo Macdonald

One of the things I love most about my job is that I frequently get to visit other peoples' work places. I'm a bit nose-y so I find it interesting to see daily working life in different places to my own. Be it the most corporate of call centre offices or a ramshackle hovel of a studio, seeing someone else's work environment is second only, on the nosiness scale, to seeing inside their home.

We spend such a hefty chunk of our lives at work and hence our work place says a lot about who we are and how we operate - from the state of our desks to the contents of the communal fridge.

Creative folk tend to have the best work spaces. One that recently captured my imagination was an aircraft hanger-sized space, bleached white, with a shocking pink carpet and fifty employees facing forward in an open plan arrangement. Everyone worked in total silence, except for the occasional sigh or ping of a stapler, and when the phone rang it pierced the atmosphere like a pin in a balloon. It was extraordinary and a little eerie. When I got back to my own desk later that morning I e-mailed the girl who'd arranged my interview and casually remarked how intriguing I found her office. "Can you imagine how interminable a day feels when you're hungover?" she replied. An inspiring work place perhaps but not for the faint hearted, or heavy drinking.

I doubt a day ever feels interminable at OKAY Studio, hungover or not. Tucked away in a corner of Stoke Newington it exists outside the realms of what most of us would call working life. The first time I went I got a bit lost; it's a prerequisite for any young studio in London that their location should be difficult to find. After much pacing in the freezing cold, I found an industrial metal gate with a piece of paper tacked on saying Peter was expecting a delivery of wood and to

call his mobile. Through the gate, into a small yard and up a few steps I entered the world of OKAY Studio.

That morning if possible, it was colder inside than out. I found Shay (coming down with flu) and Yael huddled around a small gas burner and Tomas breathing condensation into a computer screen. It wasn't quite the buzzing creative commune I'd anticipated. But as thaw set in, evidence of the nine individuals that make up the OKAY collective drifted into focus. Drifted maybe suggests there wasn't much 'stuff' but the small office space is heaving with the creative outpourings of nine very active, independent designers. Though pretty standard fare for a studio - models, drawings, materials, tools, magazines and mugs litter most surfaces - what struck me was the size. Nine designers working as colleagues in this tiny space seemed like a Herculean achievement. Granted the making takes place in the larger workshop next door, but the equal feats of planning and organisation happen in the office. I couldn't and still can't really fathom that such a coherent collective springs from such a sprawling little room with so little space.

I've often wondered since how this cooperation works on a practical level. Rent costs probably have something to do with it, but there must be a lot more than money that holds the group together and stops them from strangling each other. So I grabbed the opportunity of

their inaugural curated exhibition to find out how the collective works and their answers were rather insightful:

*Is there an OKAY Studio culture that sets your collective apart from another?*

Yael: We don't have a plan or strategy as such. Everything about OKAY studio is decided as we go along. We don't know where it's going but we enjoy it while it's happening.

Oscar: The fact that we're all individual designers rather than a brand or company. The ups and downs affect us more as individuals and don't harm the studio as a whole.

*Do you have rules?*

Shay: We must Hoover after using the workshop and are not permitted to use the table saw as a working surface.

Matthias: All our rules are unspoken except the ones applying to table football. The unspoken ones come from being friends working together.

Peter: We have complex table football rules - ten-nil means you have to show us your pants. Some of the group are now two-time pant veterans.

*What are the positives and negatives of working together in a group?*

Shay: There will always be someone hungrier than you to go and get food.

Jordi: Someone usually makes coffee for

you but sometimes you have to make coffee for everyone else.

Oscar: I'm blessed with colleagues who all have bigger tool bags than me.

*Is it difficult hosting group shows if some individuals get more attention?*

Yael: Sometimes some projects get a lot more recognition, but generally we all benefit from it.

Peter: It's the good spirit running through each of our shows that's more important to us.

Matthias: We can then talk behind the back of that particular designer, saying how rubbish we think their work is.

*How do you share materials, machines and food?*

Oscar: I drink Peter's coffee and use his tools.

Peter: We have a chart that shows how much milk and coffee we've all bought and how little Oscar has contributed.

Jordi: We all try and help each other.

Reading these you get sense of what it might be like to be a part of OKAY Studio - essentially a lot of fun, coffee and table football. They set up shop straight out of the RCA Design Products MA course and have carried the student camaraderie that brought them together through to the collective, which seems

to be the glue that keeps them together. Beneath the fun and games though it works so well, not just because of their friendship, but also because they have an intrinsic sense of the individual/group balance. Maybe the secret lies in the table football but the set-up is definitely more unique than okay.

## Good things from small spaces

by William

Wiles, Senior Editor, *Icon Magazine*

There's no escaping it: London is a crowded place. Young people starting out in the capital often find their lives dominated by the problem of accommodation in the midst of a chronic housing shortage. Unless they are blessed with wads of cash or unusually tolerant parents, most 20-something Londoners wind up in a rented flat that is some combination of cramped, expensive, shared, squalid or inconvenient. Many formative years are spent paying extortionate amounts of money for the privilege of staring at the wrong side of a locked bathroom door and wondering idly about carbon monoxide poisoning.

This overcrowding might not be very pleasant, but it's not without its advantages. Being obliged to share flats prompts the growth of social networks in a city that can be an isolating and lonely place. If the experience of sharing doesn't result in lifelong friendships (and it nearly always will), it does at least result in a lifetime's supply of entertaining dinner-party anecdotes about the slob, sociopaths, anal-retentives, fetishists and boors that one has had to live with.

On a broader scale, being shunted into an unknown or undesirable neighbourhood by brute economics and the mysterious necessities of the public transport system can be genuinely positive, promoting social mixture, and urban exploration while challenging preconceptions about other communities. Travel, even between postal districts and Underground zones, really does broaden the mind.

The daily experience of London's crowds can also lead to an improved appreciation of space. The value of a little room becomes very clear, and as it does, we begin to see the objects that fill our lives in sharper focus. Small flats demand creativity of their inhabitants, especially in an age when we are expected to own more and more stuff. Every square inch of every room has to work for its occupier and earn its rent. Limited space can make designers of us, and certainly makes design critics of us.

Being overcrowded is difficult, but difficult can bring out the best in people. The challenges of living in London can make us more sociable, and better able to combine our individuality with the support and stimulation of a group. It can make us more open, and free our thinking. It can make us more practical, and more creative. These are all admirable, desirable qualities, and they're all present in the output and ethos of Okay Studio. Okay Studio shows that it's possible to keep individuality alive in a communal framework. And the studio's individual designers have consistent virtues: economy and creativity in the use of space, practical rigour combined with real wit and lightness of touch, and a sense of respect for the people who will end up using their products. They understand that your space is important, that the way you use your space matters, and the things that you bring into your space should be practical and beautiful. No doubt they could design anywhere, but their work is perfect for London.



## OKAY studio

**ABOVE** Clockwise from top left; Peter Marigold, Jordi Canudas, Oscar Narud, Yael Mar, Tomás Alonso, Shay Alkalay and Mathias Hahn.

Given the nature of the groups activities, it is very very rare that everyone is in the same place at the same time. This makes meetings and photography occasions a lively 'challenge'.

**FAR LEFT** Hiroko Shiratori

**LEFT** Jorre van Ast



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**FAR LEFT** Hiroko Shiratori

**LEFT** Jorre van Ast



## OKAY studio history

June 2006

The founding members Tomas Alonso (ES), Peter Marigold (UK), Hiroko Shiratori (JP), Mathias Hahn (D), Oscar Narud (N), Jorre van Ast (NL) graduate from the Royal College of Art Design Products course.

In November 2006 the original studio space was found at Industry in Stoke Newington. The somewhat cramped space was divided into two, half studio, half workshop where circular saws and laptops are put into intimate proximity with just an old kitchen door separating the two.

An invitation for the designers to participate in the 2007 Cologne Furniture fair as a group necessitated that a name was generated for the guide book, for which a vote was taken on either 'Piggy Back' or 'OKAY'. Following this the collective has taken part in a number of exhibitions both in the UK and abroad including a large installation at the Hotel Puerta America, Madrid, DNA Form, in London and the Milan furniture fair 2008. In 2008 additional space was found within the studio complex and the group expanded to accommodate Shay Alkalay and Yael Mer - Raw-Edges (IL) and Jordi Canudas (ES).

[www.okaystudio.org](http://www.okaystudio.org)







**HOME GREENROOM (2006)** First prototypes for the bases of the Greenroom, which is now being produced by Italian manufacturer Teracrea.



**5 DEGREE STOOL (2007)** A stool reduced to its minimum expression, based on the premise that, as temporary seating devices, long term comfort is not usually a mayor priority in the design of stools.



**5 DEGREE TABLE (2008)** Borrowing from the aesthetics of the 5 degree stool, the 5 degree table is an obvious evolution into a temporary (or not so temporary) trestle table.



**BREAD LIGHT (2008)** Made as a table centre piece for the Designs of Year awards ceremony at the Design Museum London using a standard 'Empanada' (traditional Spanish pie) bread recipe. The light works as well!

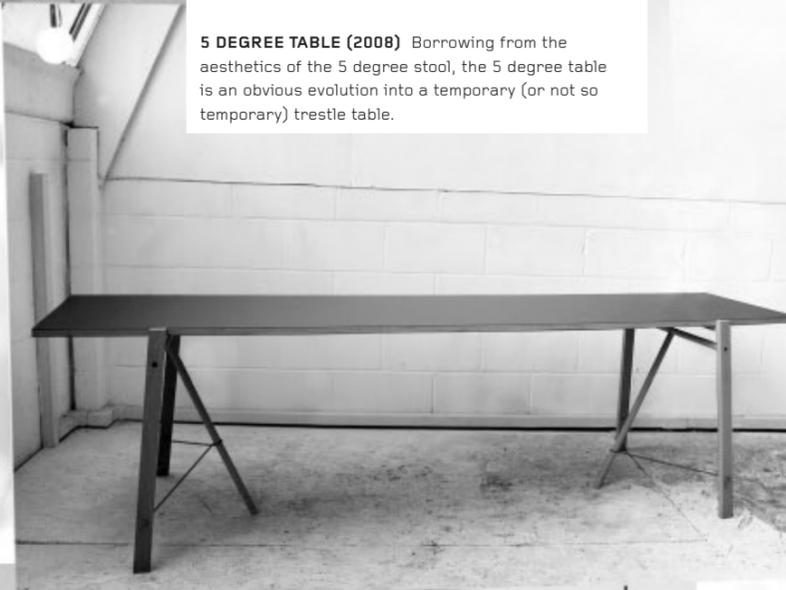
# Tomás Alonso

I was born in Vigo, a small city in the north west of Spain, in 1974. Vigo, although a beautiful place with lots of fresh seafood, is not the most cosmopolitan or creative city I can think of and definitely not the kind of place where I saw myself pursuing my lifelong dream of becoming a designer. At the age of 19 quite determined to pursue this path and eager to see more of the world, I left my hometown and moved to the USA where I studied industrial design while I worked designing car wheels for a few years. During this time I eventually became design director of O.Z. Racing, an Italian company producing aluminium wheels for high end cars. It was a nice first step, but not enough for me yet; I wanted to see more, experience more and design more. I moved again a few more times; Italy, Australia and finally London where I came to study design products at the Royal College of Art graduating in 2006.

This last move has been the most significant for my career by far. Being at the RCA and in London in general has given me the opportunity of meeting some really amazing people and has allowed me to expand my interests in design and to

really develop the focus of my work. Here I felt for the first time that I had the chance to do what I always wanted to do, but I was never exactly sure how to. Starting OKAYstudio has been one of the best things that I can think of in my life and I really enjoy the idea that here I can share my passion of working as a designer as well as the experience of the everyday with some of my best friends while making a living.

I believe this path to move into product and furniture design via my previous experience with the automotive industry and with manufacturing processes in general results in an intuitive approach that uses simplicity of forms to communicate ideas and functions. For me it's also very important that the objects I design will eventually make their way into people's hands and people's homes. I would like them to be used, lived with and enjoyed, that means that they have to work in different spaces and in different ways for each person. I would like to think that the products I design reflect on this very human way of living. They are not so much interventions in the home, but rather natural evolutions.



**STAMP. DISPOSABLE/REUSABLE CUTLERY (2006)** Avoiding any unnecessary elements, the design of Stamp cutlery uses the form to give structural strength making the most out of the properties of aluminium.





Tomás Alonso



**NO. 7 CHAIR** A chair made using traditional steam bent wood techniques with a not so traditional look. Taking inspiration from the classic Thonet chairs the nube chair reinterprets the traditional bent wood aesthetic.

First prize in Promosedia International Design Competition 2008 Award.

Steam bent wood / plywood



**MR. LIGHT SERIES** A series of lights designed around the new LED T8 tube light bulbs. Aside from being radically more energy efficient and durable than standard fluorescent bulbs, they allow for more flexibility with the design by reducing the number of components and by not needing a reflector shade. These lights explore the formal continuity between the bulb and the fixture while playing with the materials come together to produce a series of unexpected characters.

Powder coated steel / Ash



# Thank you

OKAY studio are very grateful for all the help in making UNDER THE SAME ROOF happen.

Firstly, thank you to our host Zeev Aram for inviting us to the gallery – and Daniel Charny for laying his curatorial reputation on the line.

Thank you to Hugo MacDonald (Wallpaper), Will Wiles (ICON), Daniel Charny and Roberto Feo for their erudite observations on cramped working conditions in creative London. Bank Leumi, the Israeli Embassy, SNOG frozen yogurt, Sakura Masamune, Colin Blane at 3D systems, Justin Hobson at Fenner Paper and Michael and Jon at ANNEXED.

Especially, a very big thank you to Luke Hayes for a fantastic series of photographs and to Cai and Kyn Taylor (Cai and Kyn) for somehow digesting these past months into a great catalogue.

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