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AS TIMES GO BY

The years 1971 – 2001 seen in retrospect

In autumn 1971 I began at "the ceramics department" of the National College of Art, Crafts and Design (NCACD) in Oslo. I was 19 years old, wore pigtails and a corduroy skirt, and I wanted to "do something with my hands". In the winter of 2001 I am the professor in charge of the Section for Ceramics at Bergen National Academy of the Arts, and in this capacity I must take a broader view of the future than that demanded by my own artistic activity.

My working life as a craft artist between that time in 1971 and now in 2001 coincides with the development of Norwegian Craft Artists (NCA) and professional consensus around the concept of craft art. In what follows I shall move backwards and forwards between personal experience and more general reflection.

1 A description of my most important milieu in my formative years

Education

The time at NCADC at the beginning of the 1970s proved to be a turbulent period. The ramifications of the student revolt in 1968 had eventually reached Norway, and craft art schools were no exception. Ceramics was a relatively new subject (established in the 40s at NCADC) and constituted quite a small milieu with few qualified teachers. Teaching was based on the traditions from classical drawing and modelling, knowledge of form and technical drawing, and a workshop practice that was aimed at both small-scale production and industrial design. A critical student milieu confronted this study programme – a milieu which at times was overweeningly self-satisfied, but which initiated considerable creative activity and discussion in order to find alternative bases for the subject area. Expressed and unexpressed professional attitudes and norms for beauty and harmony were sharply debated. In the cellar in Ullevålsveien the physical workshop situation was pretty miserable, and with the students' demand for improved workshop practice, this was also a source of heated argument. Our references were among others Leach and Hamada, folk art craft art traditions. The direction we wanted to go in was more artistic practice based on the premises of craft art, not industry – parallel with the direction in which craft art outside the school was going in at the same time.

Workshop

My professional attachment to ceramics began in 1974 when I practised at Lisbet Dæhlin's workshop. This was at Frysja Art Centre (Kjelsås, Oslo), one of the many industrial sites that were eventually rebuilt as premises for cultural activity – first by private initiative at the end of the 60s, some years later under municipal auspices. Working at Lisbet's I took part in a workshop life characterized by a rhythm and relative calmness that I believe most craft artists would be hard put to find today. (That at any rate is how I remember it.) The amount of administrative work most artists have today, for example with paperwork and externally-oriented activities, was much less developed then. I soon discovered that the attitudes I had taken with me from the school concerning how you could work effectively and productively were of limited value in this context. Lisbet based effectiveness in her work on other criteria – focusing on the unique, handmade object. This both confused and interested me – because I could see that it was a work form that gave artistic results.

The ceramists in Oslo had their own regular ceramics meetings that workshops took it in turns to hold. Here practical matters such as raw materials, tools and prices were taken up. It was a generous milieu which welcomed newcomers and was characterized by hardworking professionals, most of them women. I could mention names like Kari Christensen, Laila Baadstø, Ingrid Mortensen and Bente von Krogh.

In 1975 a large number of vacant premises at Frysja were advertised, lent by Oslo Kommune, and I was able to rent my own workshop, along with quite a number of other eager new craft artists: textile, ceramic, metal, glass, leather. At that time the relatively small number of applications meant that every applicant got a place. Frysja became a vigorous environment for craft art in the years that followed, both professionally and politically, and with joint events such as Christmas sales, public days, tours for school classes etc. We focused on establishment of solid workplaces and professional status. You'll see this clearly if you read the catalogue for the exhibition *Frysja på by'n* (Frysja in town), which was shown at the Museum of Applied Art in Oslo in 1983. Most of the text deals with the material circumstances of craft art and the positive aspects of having professional workshops in a professional community. In retrospect it is surprising to see how prominently argumentation concerning economic factors featured. The Artists' Action in 1974 had granted this legitimacy. More professional and artistic reflections, on the other hand, are almost non-existent.

This exhibition, where 19 craft artists from Frysja took part, was a high point of our professional community, with maximum results for all the effort put in. There were many exciting works, extremely experimental assembly (use of scaffoldings 15 years before they appeared at NCA's annual exhibition¹) and a record number of visitors: 15,000 in three weeks and a queue far down St. Olavsgate at the opening.

The 1970s' ideals of a simple, environmentally-friendly and no-nonsense existence provided a fitting back-cloth for craft art activity. The expanding craft art sector had use for timely arguments. At times some of these were used in ways that were later easy to parody, and may be seen in hindsight as romanticism in a period of economic growth. However, they may also be viewed as serious attempts to find a viable value base for future life.

Workshop sales outlets

A central theme in the milieu was the management of commerce by the artists themselves and development of possibilities for this – as a supplement to gallery exhibitions and as an alternative to so-called applied art shops. The workshop sales outlet in Gabelsgate was established on this basis in 1975. A group got together to rent a place to exhibit and sell their own works – this was the concept in brief. The project had parallels throughout Norway; the idea of "artist-run commerce" was a sign of the times. The primary reason was cogently summarized by Gro Jessen in the catalogue for the Workshop Sales Outlet's 15th anniversary exhibition in Oslo Art Association in 1990, where she wrote: *"What we felt was necessary was to take charge of the commercial aspect of craft art, so that our works would not disappear in an industrial and semi-industrial fog, or in a mist of home crafts, souvenirs for tourists and gift articles."*

Throughout the years the Workshop Sales Outlet was based on collective management. The group had between 20 and 25 members, from Frysja, Trafo and other places, working with ceramics, textiles, glass and ornaments. The feeling of taking charge of one's own future was strong – all options seemed open to us in the initial phase. In periods activity was extremely high, and experiments were done with forms of commerce both at the Outlet's own premises and at other places (exhibitions and sales at shopping centres, festivals, summer markets etc.). In retrospect it is almost an incomprehensible project: all the energy that was concentrated in a small rented property

¹ NCA: Norwegian Association for Arts and Crafts

in a back-street at Frogner (western part of Oslo). Such activity cannot be explained merely on the basis of economic or practical criteria. The project was a stage in a larger developmental process. We can also see that there was abundant self-irony when, for example, we look at Elisabeth von Krogh's series of advertisements in the catalogue for the anniversary exhibition. However, eventually this type of collective voluntary work became too much for many of us, and people's interests developed along different lines. After a heated, emotional debate the workshop sales outlet was closed in 1991. The Ikea shelves, safe and stepladder were divided among the members and the profits were spent on a trip for all to the Biennial in Venice.

Organization and magazine

As soon as I became a member of NCA I was asked to become a board member. In NCA it has always been easy to gain influence for those who want to take part – a positive aspect of being a small organization. The mid-70's was a decisive time for the defining and placement of craft art as an artistic, not a commercial activity. Sector-related political work was carried out with considerable energy and optimism. I was new in the field and had little opportunity to gain an overview of the positioning and hidden agendas in the complex association that the Artists' Action² constituted – with the special political groupings that characterized the most radical political activity in Norway in the 70s. For among other reasons I participated out of a need for identification – which NCA provided a great opportunity for. We had a professional policy-making milieu where there was a strong bond between involvement and personal friendship, and we utilized this work form to the maximum.

From the work on professional policy in NCA and work in what was then called Formidlingsentralen (the Communication Centre) arose the idea of a special magazine – this too as a part of the "artist-run commerce" strategy. The magazine was formally linked to NCA, but in the first years after its start in 1980 it was driven forward on the initiative of a group interested in this. The editorial staff in the first few years consisted of Finn Alsos, Toril Bjorg, Ulla-Mari Brantenberg, Lisbet Dæhlin, Gro Jessen, Carin Wessel and myself. As in the workshop sales outlet project we based our work on an extreme "do-it-yourself" attitude, which we regarded as both right and necessary. No one had experience of similar work. We got our bearings in the field as best we could. Toril and I even took evening courses in journalism at NKS (the Norwegian Correspondence School) with John O. Egeland and Erling Borgen as teachers.

The editorial group worked (naturally) collectively, had long meetings every week wrote (by hand) and read aloud to one another, leaving plenty of room for testing of ideas of varying quality. At the core of our work was our belief in the value of craft artists themselves having their say. *"We have the desire and will to work – because we can see that we have an empty space to fill. I ... I We started this magazine because we were convinced that we needed a form of extended communication, where not only the object, but also ideas, the work process, history and criticism would be visible, and when no one would do it for us, we had to do it ourselves."* it says in the leader in the second number in 1981. Initially there were few theoretical writers – perhaps only a handful of art historians. We also used writers who were historians, authors, anthropologists or others in a relatively large radius from our own subjects, in order to actively extend the network.

Both the work in NCA and on the magazine was more symbolic than properly paid. Against the background that I mentioned in the link-up between strong social and professional contact, fees were spent a number of times on joint study trips, for example to Stockholm, Copenhagen, Turkey, Cyprus, Barcelona and Santorini. In this way relatively small sums of money went into professional recycling of some kind – activities that again influenced further professional work.

² Artists' Action: political activist group for artists' income and position in society, formed by all the artists' organizations in 1974

2 Afterthoughts, now

Forming a common identity

The basis for much of the energy expended in the 1970/80s was the idea of having a common platform – for a time. The earlier term "applied art" included craft art, design and forms of minor industry. The new definition of craft art from 1974 sounded as follows: *Works in textiles, ceramics, glass, leather, metals and other materials that are formed and finished as products in the craft artist's workshop – under conditions where the craft artist him/herself is responsible for the process from raw materials to the finished product.*" This was primarily formulated to draw up a boundary against design activities and industrial production, and to inform the uninitiated (and there were many of them) of the existence of a particular area in the field of visual art. Understanding of the new "craft art" had a cohesive effect on a group of artists who obviously had common interests, and who had everything to gain both economically and professionally by interacting with other groups of artists on the Norwegian cultural scene. At the same time as each individual was responsible for their own artistic project, I believe we felt that we were part of a larger whole with a common consensus on values that would barely be possible today.

Theory construction

It wasn't enough to want to "do something with your hands" – it soon turned out that as a craft artist you had to do a lot with your head too. Analytical activity took place with considerable determination from the very start of the 70s, but we lacked proper traditions for debate and criticism. The number of professional meeting-places increased as NCA became a stronger organization, likewise the availability of new types of seminars and gatherings with other groups of artists and broader issues. Questions concerning craft art as an art form were always on the agenda. The basis and horizon for discussion were patiently developed over time. Surprisingly enough, the magazine did not cease publication after 5 – 10 years, and with its "ups and downs" it has been a forum that has gained respect far beyond its immediate circles. Subsequent ambitious projects such *Det tenkende øye (The Thinking Eye)*, where NCA collaborated with the industrial art museums in a three-year project aimed at promoting understanding of craft art, also played a major part in developing larger professional networks.

References for craft artists have to a large extent been taken from their own practice, but these have also been exploited and stretched to an impressive degree. Poor access to theory and other relevant references nevertheless resulted in the corpus of arguments and viewpoints being potentially limited. Debate could and still can at its weakest seem internal, defensive and predictable, sometimes full of rhetorical articles of faith just as much as exploratory questions. The historical and contemporary knowledge base has not been particularly strong in the milieu as a whole – a consequence of general education in Norway, which is not renowned for its high level in the art and culture sector, and of education at the craft art schools, which has been more practically than theoretically oriented. Statements made by individual craft artists about their own work for example in catalogues have often had such an open, general form ("*I am occupied with time, material and transitoriness*") that they appear as unclear, rather uncontroversial texts in relation to time and place, and as too fuzzy in terms of boundary-setting or manifestation. Thus, craft artists may sometimes appear to be on the mere fringe of contemporary discourse.

Theory construction in visual art milieu, particularly at educational institutions in the past decade, came almost as a shock to craft artists. Education in art theory soon evolved into a new power factor in the institution of art. From considering theoretical activity a manic deprivation disease, driven onward by fanatics with no understanding of hand or heart, craft artists, too, have had to recognize the need for evolution in this field, at any rate in educational programmes. Achieving college status meant that counter-demands had to be met. The subject area needs dialogues between practice, theory and history for further development, and this must be organized in a binding form, for example in curricula.

Craft art in Norway constitutes a small, marginal milieu both for artists and for contiguous categories like art historians and writers. The number of theoreticians in Norway/the Nordic countries could scarcely produce an up-to-date debate between any of them – quite simply because they are so few. Those individuals who repeat themselves in the media become all too apparent. That is why in the future it is crucially necessary to develop contacts internationally.

Is there any point in continuing to describe something as craft art?

NC's current definition is as follows: "*Craft art is a creative art form, an idea-based artistic endeavour that uses a material that is part of an artistic process as its point of departure.*" Today this formulation is hardly designed to unite people. It stipulates that craft art is still art, but it clearly shows how hard it is to distinguish the phenomenon of craft art from fine art in a meaningful way, at any rate in a brief formulation. In principle the relationship between concept and material is a problem common to all artistic activity, and cannot be limited here as applying in particular to what could be called craft art.

Craft art in its specialized institutions (association, communication, school, museums) and in institutions where it has a stated place, still has room for areas that fine art would not touch: particularly the field of functional objects, applied art and affiliated traditions. This for me gives grounds for continually attempting to give the field a name and treat it as a complex phenomenon. For my own activity it is a prerequisite that there are visible spaces for this genre. In broader artistic terms these spaces are crucial in that they show extremes in forms of expression and by this preserve breadth. Craft art also has professional milieu where working with and developing advanced material expressions is legitimate – something that may be rather controversial in today's art life.

At the end of the 90s we could see the contours of a new art hierarchy. If you put theoretical understanding at the top and the exercise of material expertise and handicraft at the bottom, not only will this have a negative effect for craft artists but also for a large number of active fine artists. The consequence of this might be new alliances, let's say for example between ceramists and sculptors – the latter could be included in NCA's definition of craft art without any problem.

Not everything that is produced in ceramics is craft art. Today, ceramics as an artistic area does not merely concern itself with craft art, but with all visual expressions that can be produced in ceramics. These expressions are not *new* areas of activity. We find them in earlier history, but before today's concept of art was developed, they had other designations and functions (e.g. religious objects, folk art, ornaments). With this standpoint, responsibility for education will become very open – *too* open, some would say.

When Bergen National Academy of the Arts was established in 1996, a new name appeared: "Department of Specialized Art" with sections for photography, graphic art, ceramics and textiles. What is common to these four as art programmes is that the programmes are organized in specialized subject areas, defined by material or medium, in contrast to the form of the art academy where there are no subject boundaries. These subject areas are all concerned with the integration of development of technical skill and artistic expression. Here we see, as in the paragraph above, new communities as a result of movements in the field. This is not unproblematic in practice – but what

alternative would be without problems?. The four areas have different histories, different techniques, different theories – and paradoxically enough it is virtually their distinctive characters as separate subject areas that will keep them together.

The organization of craft artists in the 70s has often been interpreted as hostile to design and industry. I have not viewed it in that way – even though you could probably find emotional statements that pointed in that direction at times. I believe that what was done was to distinguish analytically between activities with different purposes in order to crystallize the necessary methodology and identification – and that this was a necessary procedure. It is possible that there is a new situation today where sectors of industry recognize the need for artistic competence. If that is the case, naturally we can meet as partners in new forms of production.

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There is much that surprises, annoys and frustrates. Being in a poorly defined field is no laughing-matter. The art hierarchy continues under new guises. It is not easy to become a famous artist with craft art as a point of departure. Critics (if they exist) can always allow themselves to begin an article with: "It's hard to tell whether this is craft art or fine art" – instead of writing about what they actually see. The art world is only open when it wants to be – when it comes to prestige or money, other mechanisms come into play. There are plenty of provocations. At the same time: We have quite a different number of skilful craft artists today than 30 years ago. Events like the Norwegian ceramics exhibition in Amsterdam during Ceramic Millennium 1999 impress an international professional milieu. Both younger and older craft artists are engaged in multifarious and expansive projects, with considerable breadth in basic ideas and application. More than previously, educational institutions are playing an active and central role in encouraging debate and development. There are many positive signs.

Those fields that wish to define themselves through materials or techniques – such as ceramics – will have to live on with the questions of what the purpose of handicraft skills, techniques and traditions is. Only by showing that you are expressing yourself in a valid artistic manner in a demanding contemporary world, can you explain and defend that knowledge. But who is deciding what is valid?