

ZWINGER IN ARENDAL

Text for the exhibition *Zwinger und Ich*, Bomuldsfabriken 2015
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When I received an invitation to attend the exhibition *Zwinger und Ich* at Bomuldsfabriken, I at first thought the title referred to a relationship between one person (Zwinger) and another (Ich). In fact, it referred to ten contemporary artists and a building housing a collection of porcelain.

Zwinger Palace in Dresden is a Baroque structure built in 1709. The name stems from the German verb *bezwingen* (to subjugate, conquer, etc.). It is inside Dresden's fortress and protected by a double set of walls. Between these walls, any invading forces, if they manage to get inside, would presumably be vanquished. Today Zwinger Palace houses the Dresden Porcelain Collection. It contains ca. 20,000 objects, both Chinese and German, many of which are fine examples of Meissen porcelain. Not far from Dresden is the Meissen Factory, the first European factory to produce porcelain that could compete with Chinese varieties. This dramatic story involves alchemy, chemistry, economics and politics.

Shortly before 1700 (and you can read a fuller account of this story on the Wikipedia page 'Meissen porcelain') the alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger left Berlin and went to Wittenberg, in flight from Frederick II of Prussia, who was trying to hold him in 'protective custody' in order to produce gold. Böttger was soon employed by August II the Strong, who had an equally great need for gold. Böttger was more or less imprisoned in Dresden in order to devote himself fully to alchemy. While there, however, he met the scientist Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus, who some years earlier had made a substance roughly similar to the precious Chinese porcelain that had been known and traded in Europe for a few hundred years. Böttger then began experimenting with various ceramic substances. At the turn of 1707/08, he presented his new, white hard-paste porcelain to August II the Strong, who immediately understood the 'goldmine' he had been handed. On 6 June 1710, the *Königlich-polnische und kurfürstlich-sächsische Porzellan-Manufaktur Meissen* was established at Albrechtsburg Castle in Meissen. Thirty employees were held hostage at the castle in order to experiment with recipes, firing, pigments and glazes: August was keen to keep the porcelain recipe a state secret.

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Jet to the 21st century. The Network for Nordic Contemporary Ceramists (NNCC) was established in 2013, with the purpose of stimulating reflection and discussion on contemporary ceramics. The international network organizes workshops, seminars and exhibitions. All its ten members hold higher degrees in ceramics from Nordic art schools; they are younger artists who have distinguished themselves in various art scenes. Some are doing, or have completed, artistic research at the PhD level, and they are familiar with discussions about reflection and contextualization that are regularly addressed in art schools.

NNCC inaugurated its activities with a trip to Zwinger Palace in 2014.

What happens when the NNCC members encounter the Dresden Porcelain Collection? According to their own story:

- Several are bedazzled. The collection is too large.
- One is disappointed over the lack of enchantment.
- One is captivated by the collection's shelf supports.
- One relives a previous life there.
- One turns away to look at what else the palace has on show.
- One goes to town to find something of interest.
- And several are overwhelmed by the documentation of the firebombing of Dresden in 1945.

NNCC is not a group of apprentices seeking inspiration and knowledge. They are contemporary artists who take liberties in transforming and refining materials. The interaction during the trip has resulted in maximal diversity in artistic processes and results.

Heidi Bjørgan recreates the Dresden Porcelain Collection's baroque shelving in brown clay with white glaze – materials that were used to imitate porcelain before Böttger discovered the recipe. She takes a peripheral, framing element as the starting point for creating new art objects. These are turned upside-down, as is the material value.

Christin Johansson uses white porcelain as a raw material in performative rituals. She combines it with beeswax, swan feathers, porcelain pipes, mussel shells, wool and hair – all symbolically-charged materials with sensory qualities. The materials and objects are used in orchestrated and documented acts that deal with the body, healing and transformation, yet in a framework that does not suggest any specific time and place.

Gitte Jungersen subjects ceramic materials to extreme processes in the kiln. Through almost total meltdown, which is usually a catastrophe in ceramic production, the glaze turns into independent three-dimensional objects, not merely a surface material. Raw materials, melting temperatures and gravity become the means for a material research project that largely allows the kiln to play the role of 'maker'.

Mårten Medbo's work is called *Thinking Through Clay* – a title that could actually represent all the works in the exhibition. Sculptures with visible knots, collisions and internal processes visualize questions about the brain's complicated functions, science and un-science, science and craftsmanship, also how thinking can cause the brain to overheat.

Gustaf Nordenskiöld makes mundane things appear unfamiliar and strange, for example, by making large hooks out of porcelain and stoneware – materials that are non-functional for hooks – and exhibiting them as autonomous objects in spatial contexts. In Bomuldsfabriken's unrefined factory environment this engenders uncertainty: what type of scenario is this?

Irene Nordli has worked for many years with porcelain figurines as key formal elements. Now the porcelain is drowning in clay, almost like lava – a type of anti-Meissen? Photographs from the bombed and city of Dresden, with charred ruins and rubble drown out the white world of porcelain. Here the meaning of FIRED exceeds what it normally means in the ceramists' vocabulary.

Kjell Rylander presents combinations of medium-density fibreboard, paper, glue, cotton and porcelain in fired and raw states. Is this a material archive? A building-material display, of the sort one might find at a retailer? Instructions for use? A catalogue of elements? Obviously, the qualities of the porcelain that are required here are different from those necessary for the Meissen factory's production. But which qualities and for what functions?

Caroline Slotte sandblasts industrially produced dinner service until only a minimum of what was originally there remains. Before the porcelain and faience plates undergo the severe treatment, their intricate blue/white patterns are painted with a material that protects them from the sand. After the blasting process, the protected pattern-parts remain as a 'skeleton' of the plate. The pigments reorganize themselves during the process. Weird impurities in the materials come to the surface. The 'disrobing' of porcelain reveals a different object – as would an X-ray.

Kristine Tillge-Lund asks a question: How widespread is porcelain as a product of and for industry? She orders packages of porcelain from several countries on several continents – a process that ends up taking several years and involves many bureaucratic complications. She fires the porcelain in the

same state as she receives it, directly from the package, then combines the results in a larger narrative. The history of her research project can be read whilst sitting on a stoneware bench that she has made for the exhibition.

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NNCC, in its introductory text, takes as its starting point the extensive shutting down of the European ceramics industry in recent years. It asks: How does the disappearance of this industrial activity affect today's ceramic art and craft? The group of artists see the 1700s as a pioneering epoch, for it was then that the secret of porcelain was discovered in Europe. A mood of optimism and creativity propelled the establishment of ceramics factories throughout the continent. The artists ask whether, with the closing of factories and the outsourcing of ceramic production, the professional field finds itself in a new pioneering epoch, one offering new possibilities.

I ask: Does the closing down of the ceramics industry mean anything decisive for the practices of these artists? Is their question vital and relevant, or is it just a textual construction? In the exhibition, we see references to the ceramics industry at different stages. Industrial products are manipulated in ways that oppose or are alternatives to industrial forms of production. Several of the artists have solid craft-educations, experience with serial production (either in clay or other materials), and they use this expertise in new contexts. All the artists situate themselves at great distance from industrial requirements for production and results. Their status as artists is maximally exploited, and they draw on a range of art-related discourses as well as the history of ceramics. The interest in clay is a common denominator, but through a wide range of approaches: through the body, geology, chemistry, human emotions, relationships, associations, destruction...

My question is actually left unanswered – I leave it hanging for a time.

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Thinking Through Clay. NNCC aims to create a space for genuine dialogue and exchanges of opinion. Where is the space for dialogue? The artistic works discuss with each other and with the world around them. Verbal dialogue is enabled through presentations, conversations and seminars. Thoughts are communicated in an endless interactive process, through things, between things, around things and outside of things. Like ripple-effects, the less visible discussions emanate from those that are more obvious. It is difficult to gain an overview of the consequences. Not all questions should be answered, or at least not too quickly.

The Network for Nordic Contemporary Ceramists has established a framework for artist-steered collaboration and individual processes. These artists were not trapped between Zwinger Palace's double walls. To the contrary: *Zwinger und Ich* shows great diversity, research and originality. For me, Zwinger has now become a word I associate with the will and ability to engage in generous collegial communication.

In 1985, the Norwegian duet Bobbysocks won the Eurovision Song Contest with the song *La det swinge* (Let it swing) – a song-title and melody that all Norwegians my age are familiar with, regardless of musical taste. An apt revision could be: ***La det zwing*** (***Let it zwing***).

The text is written on the basis of the exhibition and seminar at Bomuldsfabriken May 2015, with additional information from other sources.