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Bowl d. 11 cm, Nina Malterud 2002. Photo: Øystein Klakegg

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Un-use - Consumption

Although word and image have dominated most of the art discussion throughout the 1900s, we cannot avoid the thing. A thing is both an object and a value. Our understanding of the thing is woven into a system of attitudes and experience, which spans from the hand's and the body's association with it, to the trade circulation and the collector's delight over it, and finally to the museum's embalming of it.

Nina Malterud's new ceramics are intimate in format, verging on hands, tools and material, like few other things produced. One could believe that these unusual, beautiful and intense objects could live their life and maintain their value from a secure haven. Surrounded by the table, the cupboard, and those who acquire things, to use them as crockery, and enjoy them by way of hand and eye.

But paradoxically enough, it is such intimate objects that perhaps most clearly display how dependent art works are on the discourse and conversation which orders our understanding of them. A key word is *crafted*. This word has had a negative ring to it for quite some time, only exceeded in negativity by the real insult, *pottery*. The reason behind such expressions, (which indicate position and power), and their negative ring is related to our irresistible desire to order the world into hierarchy, where something is considered more valuable than something else. And it follows that in order to say something is valuable, then something else, comparatively speaking, has to be understood as less valuable.¹ That which can be used has had a tendency to be disparaged in relation to that which shall only be appreciated.

The term hand-crafted can be attributed an entirely different value by being withdrawn from the debate on high and low, on pure and free art (in the museums), and art that only has a place as utility object in everyday life. The words *use* and *utility* belong together, exactly as they are used in economic theory. In English it is called the *Use-Value*, a term that covers both use-value and utilitarian value. By directing attention away from a vulgar Kantian debate on pure and applied art, over to a debate where one discusses art and the avant-garde, in relation to those changes in economics which occurred when currency no longer sought a guarantee in gold, but was secured by State and Bank, by law and written contracts, the crafted also becomes relevant to the discussion in relation to the avant-garde. Economical theory is also interesting in a purely rhetorical sense for the art debate. This is even more the case since conceptual analysis and cultural criticism is preoccupied with questions of what a sign is, of what a sign is referring to, and what it draws its value or guarantee from.

The historical avant-garde is manifold, and the art historian George Baker points out that in the avant-garde one saw the development of two structurally united parallel phenomena, namely the ready-made and abstract painting.² A third phenomenon in avant-garde art is also connected to "de-skilling" (the *un-learning* of skills as both the ready-made and the abstract painting imply), namely the hand-made, roughly pasted together one can see with Marcel Janco, Sophie Taeuber and Kurt Schwitters. That homespun, rather hobby-like expression in their work flowered to full blossom in neo-dada, which often displays a simple and rough workmanship.³ Good craft art is situated in a triangle constituted by the corners, abstract painting, ready-mades and - as I argue in this article - craft art or applied art, as it is traditionally understood.

It can be argued that it was the so-called *high art* (the avant-garde in the 20th century) that removed beauty from art and the aesthetic. Avant-garde art was radically anti-aesthetic in the formalistic sense. It has struck me that the beauty - such as it could be praised in the form of a decorated Grecian Urn - now pops up again and is saved by the hand-crafted (I see this in a 30 years plus perspective). It is particularly difficult to avoid noticing this in the works of ceramic artists, who make so rare and beautiful things. These works are often just as stimulating to look at and discuss as paintings and sculptures. It has been proposed that the problem with craft art, in contrast to painting and sculpture, is that craft art is not surrounded by or inscribed within an art world, a world constituted by conversations, interpretations, the forming of concepts and so on, in relation to what is interesting to look at.

Craft art comes to us through use. The things ought and must be used; they become even more beautiful through use, they become closer to us through use. But there is an impulse that tempts us to pluck these exclusive, hand-made one-offs out of use and consumption, and place them in museum cabinets, in order to postpone consumption. (This we want to do, and in fact do; our relation to art is so paradoxically professional.)

But the crafted can in fact be consumed. That it will be lost, that it cannot eternally travel the exchange economy, be converted into financial value, and take part in market fluctuations, saves it as avant-garde, as artistic event and aesthetic experience.

Behind such observations lies a comprehension of Georges Bataille, as read by Denis Hollier. Hollier approaches via the fetish, that passionate attachment to real things. Roland Barthes is quoted with his historical judgement on the fetish: "It is too late for fetishism." To this Hollier adds: "For if fetishism for Barthes' listener evokes the escapist tactics of rather "soft", flirtatious, material perversions, for Bataille it defines the "hard" requirements of the thing itself. Fetishism is an absolute realism: it unleashes real desires, in real spaces, with real objects. Not for an instant does Bataille oppose, as Marxists do, fetishism and use-value (for him there is no fetishism in the commodity); when he evokes fetishism, it is on the contrary, always against merchandise."⁴ What one must notice

here is the meaning of the term "use-value" in Hollier's analysis. It breaks away from the fetish seen as product ("commodity"). It is in relation to a perverse attachment and dependency on things, that the impossibly usable finds its' use. The fetish has its' use, but only as a fetish.

Hollier further refers to Michel Leiris' division between true and false fetishism. A fetish that is weakened by becoming an artwork (a false fetish) is degraded to product. Bataille's fetish has a use-value that is understood to be more Heraclit than Marx: "A materialism of use-value, it defines the material as what does not last. It goes the way of all use-value, exhausted in its' consumption. And it is not reborn from its ashes. No trace (...) Not even a memory (...) not a double. A flash - then night."⁵

The real use for Bataille as Hollier reads him, would say un-use, end of use. This applies to the radical attempt, in the 1900s, to find a sanctuary for art in the festival (Gadamer), or that which wriggles out of commercialism and trade (Adorno), and which opposes the object's means-end rationality (Burger), or that which cannot be sold (happenings and performance). This is use that cannot be preserved; it is celebration, with destruction and a senseless effusion: the orgasmic consumption and the little death. As far as I can remember, the nearest I have come to a similar understanding within Norwegian art, was the ceramics artist Marit Tingleff's remark that she had nothing against a ceramic piece being broken and glued back together again, since it belonged to fragile thing's phenomenology that they can break.

The reason for this detour via Hollier and Bataille, is to break "utility-value" and "use-value" away from the normal understanding of the object's rationality. It is also advisable to simultaneously maintain two understandings and functions of the phenomenon "consumption". Consumption is also one of those words that have become invective, mainly because it lies so latent in the development of the affluent society, with increased pollution, greed and so on. But the paradox lies in the difficulty to maintain a concept of art and avant-garde (with or without beauty) without this conception of consumption. This is in sharp contrast to most collectors', painters' and sculptors' strain of thought, and it's on a collision course with museums' technical conservation departments. Consumption is associated with both the desire for, and the interest in, the thing and its' disappearance. Use becomes *Un-use*, i.e. Consumption. The irreplaceable and the un-exchangeable become entwined with the un-preservable. This is a beautiful and obvious paradox: It is irreplaceable because it is condemned to disappear; it must be preserved because it cannot be preserved. - Well, this is one way of looking at it, one way to secure applied art a life within art, by seeing it as our time's avant-garde.

That avant-garde art can be hand-made and still beautiful; rough, but still based on dexterity, then Nina Malterud's small bowls are temporary evidence. On the way towards final consumption they manage to go from hand to hand, from image to book, from studio to outlet, and from exhibition to museum. We can celebrate for many years by using them (daily and in festival), by holding them, filling them, and emptying them again - and while we do it we can observe their beauty "without interest".⁶ The disinterested has also found a real space in craft art. (The terms in Kant's and Collingwood's distinctions are not abolished but displaced.) Beauty affects mind and body in the sensing of the bowls' weight and substance, their glazed surface, and the decor that follows the form, with emphasis on the ceramic's erogenous zones along the edges, fissures and in the downwards flow of the bowls' depression. The bowls' retort to the fetish is that they not yet slip into the bottomless night, but until further notice are set on a table.

What for the fetishist is a real desire, is, for the craft art lover, a real experience of beauty. An experience that, by borrowing Hollier's phrase, takes place "in real spaces, with real objects". Implicit in Bataille's and Leiris' terms lies a hierarchy, where the artwork must yield to the fetish. I see no reason not to deconstruct this dichotomy between true and false: Since the criteria in such hierarchies, according to deconstruction, lies in *nearness* (to Existence Itself, to the Proletarian Masses or to History Itself), it rests mostly on a matter of taste (one's political or aesthetic point of view). And since one is constantly reminded that one must respect "otherness" and "differences", I put my bet on being close to a bowl on a table. It is both different enough and near enough for me, when I can reach out my hand towards it.

Notes

¹ On craft art's symbolic connections, see my article, "Kunsthåndverkets økonomi, om skifte av standarder og andre kurssvingninger" ("The Economy of the Applied Arts, Changing Standards and Other Market Fluctuations"), *Kunstårboka* 1998. Printed in English in *Art Planet*, nr.1, 1999.

² I'm thinking of the early sculpture of Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns in the 1950s, and later, works by Robert Gober since the middle of the 1980s - Gober is special in this context since he makes hand-made editions of familiar ready-mades. In this context reference can also be made to Peter Fischli and David Weiss' brilliant hand-made copies ("simulacra") of building materials and practical objects used by construction workers.

³ The ready-made and abstract painting can be seen in context with the *representation crisis* that followed when currency could not be guaranteed ("represented") by Gold, and the sign in structuralist language was no longer rooted in real things, but obtained its' meaning in a complex interplay with other signs. See George Baker, "The Artwork Caught by Its Tail," *October* 97, summer 2001. Abstract painting demanded its' art-value without interference in a material of an artistic intent. The ready-made went from exchange-value to exhibition-value. As an artwork it was as much a commodity as when in a shop and as marketable as any other commodity, yet in a slightly different segment of the market.

⁴ Denis Hollier: "The Use-Value of the Impossible," *October* 60, spring 1992. p.21-22.

⁵ Ibid. p.23.

⁶ "Interest" in relation to the academic discussion on "art as craft" versus "art proper" as stated by, among others, R. G. Collingwood in the book *The Principles of Art*, 1938.