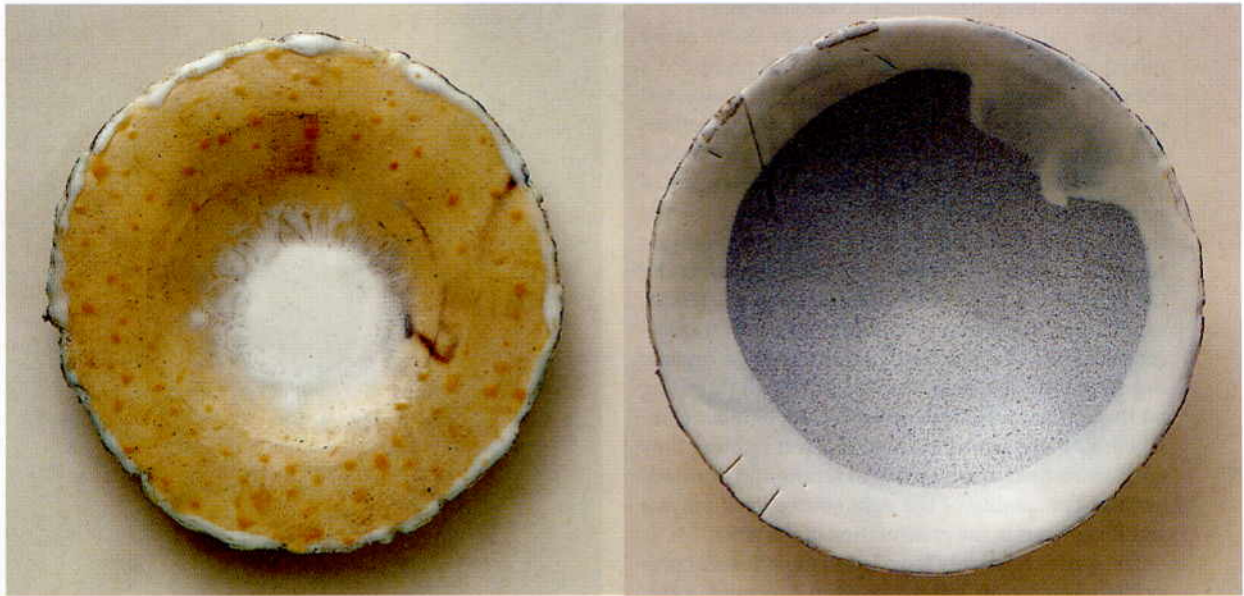


Nina Malterud

In a Conversation about Function

Article by Jorunn Veiteberg



IN THE SUMMER OF 2001 THE OSLO MUSEUM OF APPLIED Art presented an exhibition in co-operation with The Norwegian Association for Arts and Crafts. They called the exhibition *Samtale* (Conversation). By collecting a series of objects under a variety of titles and providing them with an explanatory text, the exhibition aimed to present things individually while also setting them in dialogue with each other. The theme of the exhibition was contemporary tendencies in today's craft, and one of the subjects taken into consideration was function. According to the text: "For some time craft has liberated itself from the aspect of usability but many craft artists retain a relationship to form which is still connected to use." This was demonstrated by a series of works that could not be applied to the normal sense of usability but which, instead, served as symbols or representations of familiar utensils; one such exemplification was a painting as round as a plate. To break free is a positive value and, on the basis of such rhetoric, we have to conclude that the making of utensils infers strict limits and regulations. But is this the whole truth about contemporary craft and function?

There is no doubt that it has been liberating for craft-artists to break the framework that says craft equals functional objects but, at the same time, it is degrading that important institutions such as the professional association and The Museum of Applied Arts do not provide a platform where the usable is not discarded but refreshed, to provide new meaning in a new time. That they do not provide such a platform could indicate that the usable is still a source of discomfort. It is always the cup, the jug and the plate that are central in discussions on the artistic status that ceramics ought to have. Some say that in use the ceramic object is only a thing, but if placed on a pedestal in a gallery it can – like Marcel Duchamp's urinal in his time – be transformed into an art object. Now, as before, it is the functional object that reveals the chasm in our culture between the applied art we surround ourselves with in our daily lives and the 'pure' art we see in galleries and museums. This situation has urged many to conclude that if only ceramics would liberate itself entirely from usability, it could become art.

Nina Malterud's practice demonstrates that it is not so simple. Luckily, Malterud's plates are usable, but not use-usable within the indicated limitations and



questions relating to practical use: how to make a plate that stands level on a table and survives the dish washing machine. Instead, it implies a much more open discussion on what the usable really is – today: here and now. Although the plates are small and subtle in colour, they radiate an attractive vital energy, largely because of the decoration, where the spontaneous and rough contrast with the controlled and delicate; depth is created through layer upon layer of glaze, while a glossy surface provides reflection and glow. These plates attract the eye and invite tactile response. They have both visual durability and sensual appeal. These are qualities that satisfy entirely different needs to those associated with utility alone.

Things are rarely only things. When we use them they become a part of our lives. We see ourselves in them and fill them with memories and stories. This is also the case with the artist. She also loads the objects with layer upon layer of memory and meaning. The handmade object is always a story of a life lived. The artist's choices of material and genre, decoration and language of form are not innocent actions. They pass on meanings created by tradition, history and social relations. Even something as simple and as absolute

as a plate becomes something more through use: it becomes transformed into a symbol of community and participation.

It is in such a manner, by being both thing and representation of thing, that craft has created its own space. By being used – in daily life as well as in a museum or exhibition, as a usable thing, as a social symbol and an art object – it becomes an expression of its own time. Function in craft is not about either usability or liberation from use but about providing more meaningful functions at one and the same time.

Nina Malterud continues the conversation:

During the development of these objects, it was necessary to relax mentally, to avoid any consideration of quantity, or expect any short-term results. I have mulled over them, let time pass, and allowed the process to develop itself, while I waited for a distinctive character to take form. This is not mystical. It is about allowing mental experience to provide the process with the opportunity to yield something new. Strict limitation of theme and means is a well-known method for increased concentration of expression. So-called reservation can, paradoxically enough,



increase the energy of the content. In this context, defined within a format and technique, the starting-point's limitations circled around the colour green and vegetation. My personal interest lies in that simple seldom reveals itself to be simple.

The works are fired repeatedly, glazes and colours are applied in numerous layers, seemingly absent-mindedly or accidental. The result is not determined with the first mark. Choices happen on the way. Within the pre-determined limitations of material and firing temperatures, I know that a variation of manual dexterity and chemical effect will occasionally produce images that have a right of their own, or will provide a basis for further treatment or will, occasionally, become completely uninteresting.

The individual object is one of a series – as yet inconclusive. The images enter into dialogue with each other – one maintains the other. Completed perfection

is avoided – the unsolved indicates further and requests new movement.

Every traditional craft has rules. The rules are usually well founded with a rigid blend of physical law, (the house will fall down, or the ceramic will crumble, if you don't do it this or that way) – and aesthetic convention. Materials and techniques are bearers of tradition and history. I, the practitioner, choose how this shall be conveyed. Stretching the rules demands an artistic stance of great independence, curiosity – and opposition. There are infinite possibilities of expression within the ceramic repertoire. They lie beyond the recipes and one can only discover and utilise them with specialised and comprehensive personal experience and a strong familiarity with the material.

The material demands precision in construction, to become something that meets the requirements and be considered art. Clay is a material, just like text, body or film within other fields of art. Unless given a precise form, the material remains an uncommunicative substance with general characteristics. The precision is the expediency in relation to intention.

An object has form, direction, conclusion, weight, surface and structure. These absolute realities must be considered and formulated in order to find optimal effects, and to remove anything that interferes – when it should not interfere. Interference can be a quality just as much as everything else can. It is I who administer these qualities as they express themselves in the material. To make the choices that lead to a result, I must discern between something and something else. Beautiful or ugly, they are not the same. Both can be necessary in one and the same work, to intensify both characteristics and to counteract the obvious. Precise, condensed, complex, beautiful, nervous – these are the characteristics I have searched for in this work. But if it shall be beautiful, so let it be beautiful – not just rather pretty.

Ceramic utility objects – plates, bowls, vessels, jars, jugs, cups, basins, pots – have been made for at least the past ten thousand years. They have been made by hand and, to a higher or lesser degree, with the help of mechanised tools, in production lines spanning from individual person, to family enterprise and to large organised businesses.

Within this history we find a vast use-repertoire spanning from the extremely practical to the symbolic – and it is not unusual to find these different functions within the same object. One can find transitions and hybrids bridging the functional and sculptural forms. It is not always obvious from the object's appearance what its main purpose in life has been. More often than not, one must have some expertise to distinguish a cooking vessel from a burial object. A plate created for religious practices has not necessarily been treated differently from a plate for everyday domestic use. Significant in the development of my



work is the study of ceramic objects found, for example, in museums of folk art, ethnography and history; objects from places and times way back, long before they had heard of art or design.

Everyday pleasures, habits and feelings surround the things we use. In the public sphere the object's presence is tied to commercial interest. Our society seems to be both rich and poor but it is perhaps due to a perceived lack that makes many people look towards something spiritual, something outside of the material and this widens the way for a new meaning in art. The craft artist's one-to-one process with the individual object provides a form of expression which stems from different sources and processes than those of the industrial product. That craft artists define themselves as artists declares the absorption, examination, boldness and invention, which must guide the work. The role of the contemporary artist is personal

and specified. It is not anonymous within the community. It can play with identity but always with the individual as presupposition and backdrop.

The basis for the creation of the individual object is in perpetual change. A radical and experimental creative practice must result in new types of objects and expression relative to the time. Work with utility-objects contains general artistic approaches, both in relation to formal and contextual questions, and when it concerns what lies beneath the whole: if the motive to make this work is strong enough.

Jorunn Veiteberg is an art historian and professor in craft theory at Kunsthøgskolen in Bergen and the editor of the Norwegian craft magazine, *Kunsthåndverk*. The plates illustrated range from 15 x 6 to 12 x 5 cm. Photographs by Øystein Klakegg. This article has been adapted from the catalogue on the work of Nina Malterud produced as one of a series of publications by Kunsthøgskolen, Bergen, with its intention to contribute to the debate and development in contemporary visual arts practice and education in Norway.