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Bowl, d. 12 cm, Nina Malterud 2002. Photo: Øystein Klakegg

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### **Comments on a conversation about function**

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 the 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 = 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 thing 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.

Nina 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 survive the dish washing machine. Instead, it implies a much more open discussion on what the usable really is – today; here and now. Although they are small and subtle in colour, they radiate an attractive, vital energy largely due to 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 hand-made 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.