

KONSTHANTVERK

Crafted Vernacular -A practice based research through Craft

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The paper intends to expand and deepen the field of craft, underline it and dissolve it and thereby demand new points of reference to work from, and doing so through the practices of crafts. Craft is traditionally closely linked with what we could define as a well-established concept, within a so-called Swedish identity. I will highlight different “pottering” works and should be seen as a variety of crackdowns, both historic and contemporary, where the object is to highlight the most relevant dominion in the crafts discourse. The paper also discusses knowledge of bodily work, the handicrafts of a fruit-carving artist and the hands-on-method of crossing concept: ~~konsthantverk~~. From this a micro cosmos is reflected; these heterotopes represent and resonate, “are”, in this sense, antagonistic practices. We are dealing with power relations, bodily work, plastic flowers, watermelons, values, intra-activity, with the authentic - as well as with the technicalities of cutting the flesh out of a watermelon.

INTRODUCTION

The paper will give a general introduction to the composition of the topic and structure of the dissertation project that is in its initiation, 2010-(2014): Crafted Vernacular - A practice based research through Craft, at Konstfack College University of Art, Craft and Design and the National research school in the field of arts.

Craft is today a well-established concept within the Swedish identity. But what is not made explicit in today's Craft discourse? Whose practices matter? Whose body counts? The project will highlight craft's strong discursive relationship to the construction of the vernacular element, which focuses on various artifacts and practices local, dialect and folk elements.¹

One of the core elements and one thing in particular about the research that lies in practice based surveying is that it can result in different doings, in different ceramic pieces. My departing point is my practice as a ceramicist. This also means that the significance of the dissertation project is that I intend on asking the questions from within the actual discourse. By that I mean that the central part of the approach is that the study material is regarded on a meta-level (*on* rather than *in*). But the approach also partially implies *in*; the particular thing about the study lies in the practice-based survey, which results in different doings, in different ceramic pieces. The craft practice is like, I suggest in this text, a method to problematize and criticize our material culture.

MICRO CRAFT STUDIES

To investigate what political and value hierarchies that exist in a craft field is this article's primary aim, and will be devoted to a few selected parts of a initial working method entitled: "Micro Craft Studies". I will then highlight some aspects of those Micro Craft Studies and in addition draw analogues to a contemporary craft field. The research aims to develop heterogeneous readings through the craft field, and will comprise of different crackdowns in practices and theories. According to recent material-feminist theories, the act of crossing out the concept of *hantverk* and the handicrafts of a fruit-carving artist could be applicable in looking at the fields of craft. My ambition has been to legitimize another perspective on craft than the idea of the privileged object canonized during modernism.² One of the studies started at a fruit decoration course with Jurairat Nahom, 2011-04-03.

first two cuts with the knife, then you must remove, remove the meat, otherwise
the flower is not visible

The material understanding, the technicalities, the hardness, succulence and the angle of the knife of cutting the flesh out of a watermelon, that knowledge Nahom has in her body, since the handicraft course at the Primary School in Thailand. This knowledge, that she is passing over to me, how could we look upon this? In recent discussions of artistic research, Susan Kozel mentions that, writing and thinking are practices, just as moving and making are highly conceptually driven. She mentions Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversible or 'chiasmic', where

¹ Vernacular is a term which refers to a archaic language or dialect. There is no direct synonym in Swedish. In Norstedts English-Swedish dictionary, the word is translated to: native, local, popular, popular language, a poem in dialect, mother tongue, local dialect, community dialect, local word, ethnic language. In other words, vernacular represents objects and phenomena which are not formulated by an urban establishment, but rather passed down locally.

² See for example Adamsson, Glenn (2007): *Thinking through Craft*, p. 15, where he discusses the craft concept as something outdated and preserved in relation to contemporary art.

the subject can be seen as two positions reflecting upon one another. Subject and object do not just reflect upon each other, they are attached, as are practice and theory (Kozel 2010:206). This “attached idea” of knowledge could be as Karen Barad calls it - an ongoing intra-activity, where the intra-activity creates a sense of how the world is like, both in language and the body - the material from doing (Barad 2008:134-135). The craft knowledge therefore, with the help of Barad’s theories can be understood as a result of complex intra-activities that explicitly involve both human and nonhuman organisms, cells and discourses, which materializes as subjectivity. With Barad’s theories of intra-activity, it becomes possible to understand how the body materializes in a continuous flow of intra-activity both in and outside of what we regard as physical bodies. The body materializes intra-actively by putting itself in connection with other cells, organisms and discourses. By connecting to the other living and nonliving organisms the entity expands and is constituted again and again as something new. This embodied knowledge through craft: We are all embodied through other bodies construct the notion of inter-subjectivity. We are in a way inter-cooperated with other bodies and cannot separate other humans from our selves.



I would like to proclaim:

-A piece of meat is activated in crafted production.³

The bodily work, that hand, the craftsmanship of cutting the flesh and meat of a watermelon is a big part of how the craft field is formulating itself.

The handicrafts of a fruit carving artist is also highlighted in the dissertation by Charlotte Hyltén-Cavallius. She highlights practices and questions surrounding the aesthetics of handicraft, how they are shaped and reshaped in the intercommunication between local and

³ Inspiration from: 'A piece of meat activated by electric waves of desire, a text written by the unfolding of genetic encoding. (Braidotti 2000: 159 s. 155)' (van der Tuin 2010:155).

international handicraft. The discussion is interesting in regards to handicraft and authenticity, what is authentic is defined by use of natural materials, colours and techniques, and what is not authentic in this regard is labeled artificial (Hyltén-Cavallius 2007:113-114, 219). This question is put to the test when we take a look at the Sami crafts which were not documented in Lilli Zickerman (1859-1949), archive.⁴ Zickerman means that in its foundation, the Sami crafts are interesting, as it is manufactured both by men and women, but materials such as reindeer horn, threads made of animal ligaments and must be seen as primitive and could therefore not be appreciated outside of its cultural sphere. The question is revitalised again when the Thai Cultural Association, with their nylon stocking flower were not admitted into the yearly International Native Costume Day at Skansen in 2003 (Hyltén-Cavallius 2007: 113-114, 219). One significant factor in what may be included in a handicrafts and craft discourse, is *whose* hand has been crafting. To connect the doing of the hand to an individual is the core of the discussion surrounding crafts.

I am coming from a field of contemporary craft that has for many years discussed the notion of the relationship between the two concepts of *Konsthantverk*, *konst/hantverk* (art/craft). The theories of much material-feminist literature (such as Barad) could be applicable in looking at craft discourses and its constant negotiation between the concepts of *konst/hantverk*. The purpose in material-feminism is to bring the material into the forefront in the notion of gender and contradict the notion where many feminists have turned their attention to the socially constructed models where the language, the linguistic and discursive have been a central part to the deconstruction of gender (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008: 1-17). In this, there is the material-feminist desire to break the dichotomies of culture/nature, etc up. As Vicki Kirby (2006) writes in “Judith Butler’s Live Theory”, there she is contributing the material feminism with a discussion on power structures and dichotomies that are broken up and that everything is side-by-side: nature and culture, subject and object, masculine and feminine, material and human bodies, etc. and thereby given the same agents and value. I could make an analogy between the power relationship in the conceptual pair – mind/body – with the concept of *Konsthantverk*, *konst/hantverk*. An additional analogy: ~~Konsthantverk~~, this crossing of the concept of *hantverk* inspired by the text "Language, Power, Performativity - excitable Speech" (Kirby, 2006:84) where ~~nature~~ is crossed out. What is the consequence of crossing out the concept of ~~hantverk~~?

The explicit-flowered, the decorated homes, plastic flowers in ceramic vase has been central in my study.⁵ Which is something the anthropologist Ondina Fachel Leal also talks about in the text *Popular Taste and Erudite Repertoire – The place and space of television in Brazil are also talking about*. Leal examines two homes and their aesthetics, crafts and floral arrangements in Brazil. She highlights the plastic flowers in gold colored vases and find them

⁴ Lilli Zickerman was born in Skövde 1859 and died 1949. She was educated at the Handarbetets Vännerns syster- och vävskola (The Friends of Handicrafts School of Sewing and Weaving) in Stockholm. In 1899 she started the association Svensk Hemslöjd. Zickerman’s archive consists of twenty four thousand hand painted photographs (with partly coloured surfaces), they are mounted on cardboard as plates and then placed in storage boxes. In 1899 she started the association Svensk Hemslöjd. Zickerman, Lilli (1910-1931): Lilli Zickerman, see Lagerbielke Gunilla & Silfverhielm, Maria 2000, *Den dolda skatten. Lilli Zickermans samling*. The original Lilli Zickerman collection is found in the archives in Nordiska museet.

⁵ The decorated home, it explicitly flowered in contemporary form discussion and crafts area has previously been discussed, for example, including in 1964 by Lena Larsson (1919-1999), see "En smakfull tillvaro", ("A tasty life") "Stockholmsstidningen", *Crafted form*, p. 56. See also Ahl, Zandra & Olsson, Emma (2001): *Svensk Smak – myter om den moderna formen*. (Swedish Taste - myths about the modern form). Or Hermansson, Karin Kakan (2010): "My lesbians funeral", *Vernacular Craft*.

interesting because they are found even in houses that have real flowers planted in the courtyard. From that she stresses,

In a class society, taste situates its generative locus of significance in the dominant culture or the representations that the other social groups make about what the dominant culture is. Thus, the working class imitates what it takes to be the aesthetic elements of the upper class, while the upper class studiously appropriates and labels as 'folk' and 'art' handicrafts, everyday items, and sacred objects from the others, and reconstructs them as exotic other.⁶

Leal examines the classification of the concepts such as "hand-made" and "rural folk objects". Here she states that the working class imitates what it takes to be the aesthetic elements of the upper class, while the upper class carefully adopts and labels as 'folk' and 'art' handicrafts, and in this reconstructs them as exotic other. In this we could stress how the craft fields have been (and still are) formulated from a perspective of keeping an essentialist understanding of craft and the idea of "authentic craft" is relevant to discuss? Taste according to Leal, is often considered to be a very subjective and individual notion, but it is in fact a social standard that establish power relations.

One significant factor in what may be included in a handicrafts and craft discourse, is *whose* hand has been crafting. To connect the doing of the hand to an individual is the core of the discussion surrounding crafts. I would claim that the other is an ideological process which isolates groups (here artifacts) which are considered different from the given norm. I claim in the same way that the things we use are similarly constructed of cultural and social codes. We attribute the artifact hierarchies, class and position stemming from the normality which is formulated by hegemonic structure.

Although the two "Micro Craft Studies"; crossing out the concept of *hantverk* and the handicrafts by the fruit-carving artist Jurairat Nahom, have different artistic and visual strategies, they both contribute to construct the notion of craft. The analogy I draw from Kirby previously could perhaps draw attention to the power relationship on which art has often overshadowed the concept of craft. It could also possibly demonstrate the power relationship that exists in a class and gender perspective, where it is often the female practitioners that dominated the handicrafts fields from the differently structured male-dominated professional fields of art (Rosenqvist 2007:6-10). Here perhaps we can enter the discussion on emotional subjectivity in crafts, unlike the independent objectivity in art with their male overtones in the forefront. Could crossing out the concept of *hantverk*, and the practice of fruit-carving start a negotiation on what could be included as a well-established, deep-rooted concept within Swedish identity? Following, could those aspects of "Micro Craft Studies" reflect and discuss crafts conception as authentic, or give a horizon of the crafts matter in a material culture?

Chantal Mouffe asks in the text "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces", on whether the antagonists movements or an artistic practice can be a way to create opposition, have a decisive role, in a society where the distinction between art and advertising have become blurred and where artists and cultural workers have become a necessary part of capitalist production. We can look at the craft practices as taking an antagonistic approach in relation to the idea of hegemonic order. (I would like to clarify that I am in the "craft practices" includes any practice, my, Nahoms or any other practitioners.) This antagonistic model will attempt to reformulate, disarticulate an existing order so as to install another form of hegemony practices. Mouffe again:

⁶ Leal Fachel, Ondina (1990): "Popular taste and erudite repertoire. The place of television in Brazil".

Today artists cannot pretend any more to constitute an avant-garde offering a radical critique, but this is not a reason to proclaim that their political role has ended. They still can play an important role in the hegemonic struggle by subverting the dominant hegemony and by contributing to the construction of new subjectivities.⁷

Mouffe attempt in the text to describe the artistic practice as an antagonist, but also as an antagonist who has "lost" his position to be critical of current hegemony. But she also considers that we can look at each practices as negotiations, that they contribute to the construction of new subjectivities. Mouffe ideas could we apply to the crafts field. Then we can speak of an antagonistic craft, but also a flattened(craftless) craft. Mouffe denounce an articulation of the various struggles to create a chain of equivalence between them. An agonistic practice also describes that there are a manifold of ideas who will describe a field. Also a manifold voices who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony of craft. This articulates that there are not a singel craft, it's a pluralistic activity that formulates the idea of crafts.

SO, WHAT IS AT STAKE?

Although I would like to discuss the craft fields in plural, there are disagreements about what is contained within that concept. The example given on the Thai cultural association with their nylon stocking flowers, that were firmly rejected by the handicraft advisers, raises this question, and shows how essential and significant the issue is, and shows also how excluding and normative the field of craft is as a field. The project stems from the questions: how is craft formulated today? What is its practice and context? The intention of the project is to discuss what might be encompassed in an expanded concept of craft, and wishes to, above all, give prominence to certain aesthetic practices which are not described as an established idea of craft. The topic was also intended to be examined departing from the concept vernacular that refers to the local, dialectal and popular aspects of these practices. In crossing out the concept of *hantverk* and the handicrafts by the fruit-carving, I have displayed contradictions to what craft implicate and driven the question of what craft represents today, and thereby made visible its practice and context. I want it to be a means of opening the crafts discourse to many different types of "doings" and classify them as craft. What is materialized by crafts is political, and it can make visible a variety of value hierarchies.

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Photo:

"Watermelon by Jurairat Nahom", Södertälje, 2011, photo: Hållander, Frida.