

Exhibition text *Slump – Luck By Chance*, Bomuldsfabriken Kunsthall

The glocal potential of crafts

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The strength of applied arts and crafts in Norway and Sweden in 2011 reflects as many relevant tendencies as in the artistic field as a whole. Nevertheless, a strong link with materials and physical artistic production is an inevitable part of crafts. Artists have their background within a specific knowledge of materials and craftsmanship. The material is often the point of departure for the art object, and the concept is often derived from the material itself. The craftsperson's material knowledge is inextricably tied to their craft, whether we are concerned with a purely formal-aesthetic object or a conceptual work. This gives the craftsperson a great advantage compared with most contemporary artists, which is particularly pertinent within Scandinavian arts and crafts.

Handicraft and masse production

Crafts in Norway and Sweden traditionally been tied to the decorative arts and design industry and both have inspired and mutually reinforced each other for decades. Even if handicraft is an important part of crafts, we can note that the traditional decorative arts and design industry has increasingly been outsourced to countries with low production costs. In the market-driven societies of our part of the world there are no longer the conditions for decorative arts and design to survive. How does the crafts scene relate to the increasing dismantling of the decorative arts and design industries in the Western world, along with their concomitant rise in countries with low-cost production? This issue has been taken up and discussed by Norwegian and Swedish crafts practitioners as part of a wider international discourse. They have reflected on their own position within a market-based economy that seemingly has no room for the actual production of all the ideas and concepts conceived by all the designers in the West. Craftsmanship has had to make way for mass production. The consumer would rather have IKEA than a signed work of art, as long as either its functionality or aesthetics appeals. A related aspect is linked to how crafts practitioners themselves outsource the production of their work, either in parts or as a whole, to craftspeople in low waged countries, which poses interesting questions regarding origin, value and the status of the creator. How does the designer relate to the ethical issues raised by the production of their work by workers in

the Far East, for example? Are applied artists in the process of losing their craft, and becoming pure artists, who create concepts that are brought to fruition by an “art machine”?

Global and local

As we are writing in 2011, we are subject to a globalisation process with growing momentum, which is hard to fully comprehend. The challenge for each and every one of us is to take a “glocal” perspective – one that sees the global features of the local, and the local in the global – a field in which we can understand how our everyday behavioural patterns affect others in completely different cultures, and vice-versa: how actions taking place in countries far away affect our own lives. In this area, artistic practice has a potentially important role in highlighting the structures that determine the consequences of our actions. Crafts have a specific function here. Globalisation is inextricably tied to capitalism and the ruthless exploitation of natural and human resources. The accelerating exchange of information, money and things also has a material side, and, if we continue in the same way as today, it will have unforeseen – in all likelihood – dire consequences.

Chance as a prerequisite for social development

The crafts scene in Norway and Sweden operates at the centre of these issues and the exhibition *Slump – Luck by Chance* highlights this tendency. By displaying and problematizing various instances of chance and the seemingly coincidental – sometimes lucky – fallout of the artistic process, the exhibition emphasises the craftsperson’s role as someone who carries out and selects which experiments to use and which lucky coincidences to aim for. Chance as a compositional principle underlines modern crafts’ relationship to more conceptually based artistic practices, where the incidental interplay between different, unplanned aesthetic components has long been a favoured strategy in creating interesting works of art. Nevertheless, in this case, the craftsperson’s knowledge of materials and their craft can be seen as a necessary prerequisite for their artistic production, and for the lucky coincidence that results in an interesting outcome. Chance is never quite a coincidence within the field of craft, because the creator possesses a set of well-developed techniques and knowledge of the material, which, to some extent, guides the final result. This insistence on the material and on craftsmanship highlights the craftsperson’s unique position within a globalised, market-driven society. Chance is an indispensable part of artistic research and development - of

innovation, new ideas and creativity. Chance drives the artistic field forward. By emphasising chance as a unifying factor and a common tendency within the field of craft an important feature is being highlighted: the craftspeople's knowledge and skills as a prerequisite for social progress. In a technologically focused society there seems to exist a faith in anointed business entrepreneurs and the technological advances they invent. Crafts' focus on materiality and a necessary awareness of tradition stands in opposition to the myth that technology can change everything, through sheer force of mind. The craftspeople's insistence that the creative act is founded in a material reality, and with considerable historical precedence, reminds us that also non-material designs and ideas are based on all the work that has gone before them, and on those boundaries inherent in the technology in which they operate.

The political in "glocal" applied arts

The relationship between handicraft and mass production is changing in our increasingly globalised society, and crafts are changing too. In a reality in which production is no longer visually part of the urban environment, where all products, aesthetic or functional, are created somewhere else, a boundless potential is arising for the craftspeople. He or she is given the opportunity to assume the important position of someone who makes production visible in a society where it is invisible. Herein lies a political potential - in the form of problematizing and reflecting over their own society, which is characterised by most people not seeing the connection between their own individual life choices and society as a whole. By creating works that insist on a material presence, the craftspeople activate the fertile tension between craftsmanship and production, and simultaneously activate the global in the local.