

HYBRID PRACTICE: A CRAFT INTERVENTION IN A CONTEMPORARY ART ARENA

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Craft and the White Cube

One of the preconceptions with which craft is encumbered is that it belongs in the domestic rather than the artistic sphere. The establishment of the White Cube further emphasised the distinction between art and everyday life. It represents a sanctuary for fine art and is often referred to as the temple of art. The connotations of something elevated and solemn that follow from the temple metaphor are part of the heritage of modernism that still clings to the walls of most museums and galleries. The home, on the other hand, has been seen as a dangerous arena for art because it is a place where one does not have control over how art is presented. In the home, art is at risk of being trivialised and rendered 'invisible'. This has led to greater ambivalence vis-à-vis craft in artistic contexts. Traditionally, craft has been produced for use and enjoyment in the private sphere. Even though it is joined nowadays by a great deal of contemporary fine art that also wishes to turn life practices – for instance the act of eating together – into art, this has not necessarily led to greater acceptance of functional craft as an artistic practice. On the other hand, this more socially focused art has influenced the understanding of art. The question 'what is art?' is more open today, but the answer is also further from our grasp. The paradox is that the more art tries to go beyond the limits of the institution of art, the more dependent it is on the stamp of approval conferred by exhibiting in the White Cube. Brian O'Doherty has designated the White Cube the most important context for art by far (O'Doherty, 1986). Since it is this kind of arena that makes art into art, it is important for craft artists to gain access to this arena if they are to participate in the discourse on art. It is within the context symbolised by the White Cube that craft can realise its potential as artistic expression.

An exhibition by Carol McNicoll

This was my reason for inviting the British ceramicist Carol McNicoll to exhibit in Bergen Kunsthall in Norway in 2001, a fine art institution which had never previously opened its doors to craft. Faithful as she has been to craft's connection with everyday life through making ceramics that can be used, I thought her task to be a twofold one: To present objects that break down the barriers between applied art and fine art, and to challenge the White Cube aesthetics and ideology that permeate the institution.

The verdict of the art critic of Bergen's biggest newspaper, Bergen Tidende, was very negative: 'They shouldn't have given this work house room,' she claimed. 'The pieces do not seem to feel properly at home in the institutional context ... Carol McNicoll's small objects were literally swallowed up by the huge room,' and she raised the question of whether 'exhibiting craft in the arena of contemporary art is quite simply too problematical.' (Furseth 2001).

I would like to present a different interpretation of the exhibition. My interpretation also includes a discussion of some of the fundamental problems involved in the understanding of craft in general and of craft as part of contemporary art practice in particular. The underlying questions I wish to address are:

What does this exhibition tell us about potential strategies for craft? And what kind of art is craft?

What Carol McNicoll did in order to challenge the elevated aura of the Bergen Kunsthall, while at the same time creating references to the domestic sphere, was to make drastic changes to the exhibition space (Figure 1). Patterned wallpaper was used to cover the walls, old tables and

pedestals replaced podium and plinths, and tablecloths and carpets added even more pattern and colour to the setting (Figure 2).

The exhibition strategy created tension around her objects. As ‘house-trained objects’ (Harrod, 2002) they are not quite at home in the White Cube but, on the other hand, the fine-art context forces us to view them from a new perspective. Carol McNicoll often includes cheap, mass-produced glass bowls and vases in her work (Figure 3), and since readymades have in this way found their way into art, we have learned that things can take on new dramatic force and new meanings when we are no longer blinded by the utility and usefulness perspective that governs much of our interaction with things in everyday life. The use of pattern works in a similar fashion. With all four walls papered in different patterns and framed by wallpaper borders, this was an exhibition that highlighted pattern as both a language and a value. For McNicoll, pattern is a constant interest and a means of expression (Bell, 2002:25-27). Pattern gives rise to visual pleasure, and appeals to our feelings. In our culture, it is in wallpaper, curtains and other furnishing fabrics that the joy of pattern has survived in the modern era. Our ability to read this kind of language has, however, greatly diminished (Thrilling, 2001:6). But it is a form of expression that has always held a strong position in craft and about which craft is very knowledgeable. Craft, therefore, can act as a bridge between our familiar interaction with ornament in everyday life and pattern as a value in the artistic context. This is one of the themes addressed by Carol McNicoll's exhibition. It can be viewed as an installation in which all the elements are important, and where the wallpaper, furniture and textiles are not just a backdrop with no other function than to make the room look homely. In this eclectically composed environment, the items of furniture from the historicist period take on dual properties: They serve as practical bases, ‘plinths’, for displaying the objects, but they also establish links to history and tradition, and to the mixing of styles as an aesthetic practice.

What kinds of object were placed in this environment, then? I will give a closer presentation of two of McNicoll's objects in the exhibition. The first one is titled: *The ecological implication of Judeo-Christian tradition*. This object was placed in the centre of a table in the middle of the room (Figure 4). It consists of two cheap readymade plates resting on the heads of three decoy ducks. McNicoll has decorated the plates with various transfers: On the tops of the plates, oil drilling platforms surround an idyllic village with a pond with two swans at its centre. The bottoms of the plates are decorated with typically kitschy Catholic images: Half-naked angels and a dark-haired female angel with a small child on her arm (Figure 5). Here, the ducks, which we would normally expect to be served *on* the plates, are *holding up* the plates. The symbolism should be clear enough. Here it is Nature that is supporting Culture. Our prosperity and the progress of civilisation rest on our taming and exploiting natural resources. The ideological foundations for this development are to be found in the interweaving of religion, symbolised by the angel and the Madonna image, with capitalism, symbolised by the references to the oil industry.

The second example is the only object in the exhibition that broke completely with the utility function: a column composed of jugs (Figure 6). The jug shapes were created by making a cast of a glass jug that was then used as a mould for the porcelain. Making a mould instead of using objects directly has a distancing, stylistic effect. It can also be seen as a way of venerating the objects. Employing a mould makes it possible to multiply the shapes infinitely and to assemble them to form completely new shapes. McNicoll stacked the jug shapes in

such a way that they are like an echo of the sculptor Brancusi's famous piece *Endless column* from 1937 (Figure 7). In this piece, the basic module is repeated many times over, and all the parts contribute equally to the value of the whole. McNicoll has called her column *Homage to Brancusi*, and it serves as an expressive emblem of her positioning of herself between the arena of art and the domestic setting. Unlike Brancusi's uncluttered surfaces and abstract shapes, McNicoll's column is decorated with foliage and the shapes refer, as mentioned, to something as trivial as a jug. In her impure world, art and everyday life constantly mix. The one supports the other, just as her plates can be bearers of both food and meaning at one and the same time.

Perhaps we can call this type of practice a kind of invasion, as Richard Artschwager describes his switch from producing functional furniture to creating useless objects with reference to furniture. 'The offence is that I'm spending time and money on things which should be good for something. I'm making objects for non-use; by use, I mean cups to drink out of, a spoon to stir with. By killing off the use part, non-use parts are allowed living space,' he maintains (Waal, 2003:165). As Edmund de Waal has pointed out, this is a scheme many ceramicists have used as the basis for their work. He calls it 'the re-presentation of ordinary things, as sculpture' (Waal, 2003:166). It describes exactly what *Homage to Brancusi* presents us with. It is a practice that is reminiscent of the 'bricoleur' described by Claude Lévy-Strauss in *La Pensée sauvage*. Like him, Carol McNicoll uses things from earlier systems to create new meaning.

The Meaning of Things

The significant elements in McNicoll's objects are often former utility objects. The problem we face is that of putting into words the meanings things harbour. Things are not communicative in the way verbal language is, but perhaps they can tell us something that would be more difficult to express in words? The anthropologist Grant McCracken has touched on these ideas, and even though he took clothes as his starting point, his views can be transposed to things in general. He mentions three characteristic qualities:

- Things are conservative, i.e. more stable in their meaning than verbal language. And here he quotes Miles Richardson: 'Material culture continues to have an existence, as it were, apart from the drift and flow of opinions, attitudes, and ideas.' (McCracken, 1990: 68). Information one wants to make public, but which one wants to avoid being abused and changed by language, can therefore be encoded in things.
- Things communicate more by implication and less clearly than verbal language. This gives things several advantages as a means of communication: 'First of all, it makes material culture an unusually cunning and oblique device for the representation of fundamental cultural truths. It allows culture to insinuate its beliefs and assumptions into the very fabric of daily life, there to be appreciated but not observed.' (McCracken, 1990: 68-69)
- Things are not possible to understand as broadly and extensively as a national language. They are interpreted in widely differing ways depending on age, class, gender and other social divisions.

On the other hand, McCracken points out that, as a means of communication, things are very limited in terms of what, and with what rhetorical power, they can communicate. He claims, for example, that things cannot be metaphoric or express irony, scepticism, ambivalence, surprise or hope (McCracken, 1990: 69). I find this claim surprising. It is in any case apparent that when things are deliberately used by a maker like McNicoll as part of a montage they become quite eloquent. Through her re-combination, or re-presentation, McNicoll honours both the concrete thing and praises art. Thus, *Homage to Brancusi* contains a message both

about continuity and about change. It is a good example of a type of postmodern ceramics that has liberated ceramics by opening for historical citations, humour and references to both everyday life and art (Clark, 2001: 8).

Craft and Conceptual Art

How to label Carol McNicoll's objects then? What genre do they belong to: Ceramics, craft or conceptual art? Carol McNicoll's objects can be placed in all three categories. A lot of her raw materials consist of readymades, either in the form of things or images. This is a typical strategy in conceptual art. It is not her intention, therefore, that the objects should seem handmade. All the same, the craft artist is very apparent in the work process. McNicoll is not content to just exhibit what she has found after a round of shopping, as Haim Steinbach does. Nor does she get skilled craftsmen to make replicas in different materials and sizes of the things she has selected, as Jeff Koons does. Her objects include purchased images and things as elements in a universe which also contains images and objects she has made herself. The barriers between readymade and handmade have been abolished. The same applies to the distinction between high and low, because the pictures and things she includes are mostly of the kind that the cultural elite has striven to keep out of art: mass-produced kitsch. At the exhibition in Bergen, this was symbolised by the chief icon of poor taste: a bellowing stag (Figure 8). At times the results can resemble banal pop art, but the combination results in something that is visually surprising and stimulating. Thomas Crow sees art's alliance with the trivial as a means of revitalising and analysing its own status in our culture. It can also be interpreted as a way of denoting a critical distance to the established cultural elite (Crow, 1996). This perspective is particularly relevant to craft, whose status in the field of the visual arts is subordinate.

In the view of the French theoretician Nicolas Bourriaud, an artist's job is to absorb things produced in other contexts and to recycle and duplicate them (Bourriaud, 2002). As I have shown, this is what McNicoll does, but she is not exclusively a reorganising 'postproducer'. Her objects, therefore, put her in a dual position: They follow current trends in the visual arts while at the same time embodying alternative values linked to aesthetic and craftsmanship properties that have traditionally belonged to the craft sphere. The question is whether this excludes them from being conceptual art. Can craft and conceptual art be combined, or are they irreconcilable opposites?

The reason why the question of craft's relationship to conceptual art is important is that conceptual art has emerged triumphant as the most important art tradition within contemporary art. Craft's status in this arena is, therefore, very much dependent on the answer to this question. Conceptual art cannot be characterised as a certain style with fixed characteristics, but there are a number of artists who claim to represent the movement, and their attitudes and practice have become normative. The fundamental precept is that the idea is everything. Such a conception of art is complicated, but it can succeed if, like Joseph Kosuth, one places greater emphasis on the verbal than the visual. For him, art is a matter of discussing art: 'Being an artist now means to question the nature of art,' as he said in one of his key texts in the 1960s (Harrison, 1995: 844). Another of the pioneers, Sol LeWitt, links conceptual art to the method of production: 'If an artist wants to work conceptually, this means that all the planning and decisions must be made in advance while the execution is entirely subordinate, and it is not particularly important what "the work" looks like. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.' (Harrison, 1995:834). In this manner, he wishes to liberate the artist from craftsmanship. Conceptual art has, therefore, come to stand for the ideal of both the de-aesthetisation of art and the 'deskilling' of the artist. Taking the

philosopher as their ideal, these artists were not concerned with *creating* art, but with investigating the limits of art. The kind of art this has resulted in has led to a 'dematerialisation of the art object' (Lippard, 1973). Intentions and instructions, actions and processes have been perceived as being more important than the production of physical objects. It is pretty obvious that such an understanding of art must result in a negative view of craft. Classic craft represents all the qualities that are being rejected here.

Fortunately, there are divergent views, also in the field of conceptual art, and many of today's neo-conceptualists do not share their predecessors' critical attitude to the visual aspect. A more nuanced understanding of both visual and material culture is making itself felt. This has led to a less censorious attitude to the creation of objects. It also explains the renewed relevance of the readymade in contemporary art.

In this situation, many craft artists have found room for a type of object that breaks down the barriers between contemporary art and the everyday, between high and low, handmade and readymade. Today, therefore, 'the applied arts can testify to a "conceptual investment" traditionally reserved for the Fine Arts,' as Linda Sandino puts it (Greenhalgh, 2003:111). She has borrowed the phrase 'conceptual investment' from Jon Erickson, who, in his book *The Fate of the Object: From Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art and Poetry* from 1995, uses the term about the use of readymades as opposed to 'expressive labour' in expressionist art. This kind of object contains a number of questions about what makes art art or craft craft, as the case may be. However, it is difficult to envisage a tension-free relationship between conceptual art and craft. The philosopher Arthur Danto is probably too optimistic when he claims that: 'No art is any longer historically mandated as against any other art. Nothing is any more true as art than anything else.' (Danto, 1997:27).

While Danto has shown in several texts that he includes craft in his understanding of art, the critic in Bergen found it problematic that McNicoll's ceramics were exhibited in an art hall dedicated to fine arts. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the critic's rejection was *less* about art and more about protecting one's own territory against intruders. But it was also about the inability to see craft objects as bearers of several layers of meaning over and above their utility function. This is probably the greatest problem that craft encounters when it enters the preserves of the fine arts. As Ernst H. Gombrich so incisively put it in *The Story of Art*: 'The greatest obstacle to the enjoyment of great works of art is our unwillingness to discard habits and prejudices.' (Gombrich, 1992:11)

If we open our eyes and look around us, we will discover that Carol McNicoll is not the only ceramicist who, through her practice, blurs the lines between craft and arts. In my home country, Norway, one of the consequences is that craft artists are increasingly represented both in museums of applied arts and museums of contemporary art. This trend has been accompanied by a debate on whether it is meaningful today to employ two distinct categories, or whether the time has come to abandon the term craft. I am more than happy to agree with Paul Greenhalgh who maintains that 'craft is like any other word. It has no sacred right to exist' (Greenhalgh, 2002:16). On the other hand, I hope that my reading of McNicoll's exhibition demonstrates that there is more than one way of discussing craft objects's identity as art. The fact that something is controversial on account of its being changeable and undecidable may well be a positive quality in itself that is worth preserving. I have taken this idea from Sarat Maharaj who, taking textile art as his starting point, has made 'undecidable' the key word for understanding today's practice. The 'undecidable' is 'something that seems to belong to one genre but overshoots its border and seems no less at home in another.

Belongs to both, we might say, by not belonging to either' (Maharaj, 2001:7). It was just such an aura of the undecideable that Carol McNicoll succeeded in creating in Bergen Kunsthall, thereby challenging the conventions and ideology that permeate this kind of art institution.

(This text is based on a larger manuscript about the position of craft today, which Kunsthøgskolen i Bergen plans to publish in Norwegian and English in 2005).

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