

## Crafting Knowledge?

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”Crafting knowledge” was a session organised by Anneli Palmsköld and Johanna Rosenqvist, that took place in Norrköping, Sweden, 16 June 2011 as part of the International ACSIS Conferences Current Issues in European Cultural Studies. Together the scholars participating in the Crafting knowledge-session were covering a range of subfields of craft studies today.

The session focused on the explorative question of what an academic approach that put craft theory into practice and made craft practice into theory would consist of. This is also the main question asked in the paper “Crafting Knowledge?” that recapitulates and contextualises the outcome of the session.

The paper draws up tentative categories for how research in, on and through craft can be done. By framing the knowledge emerging from craft and crafting some theories and methods of crafting are discussed. The crafted artefact and the act of making can be considered from many different aspects, for example from an artistic, historical or aesthetical point of view. Conventions of craft, rules about its making, knowledge about and knowledge through craft and crafting are some of the themes presented in a broad scope of cultural studies.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a huge interest of craft and crafting in the contemporary society. The Internet is full of craft communities and of tips and tricks for the one who wants to learn more about making things, about techniques and results. Patterns, materials and tools can be bought and delivered from one part of the world to another. The DIY (Do It Yourself) movement is widely spread, contenting people of different parts of the society and of different generations. At the same time professional craftspeople are highly appreciated, for example within the fashion industry. Without highly competent leather craftsmen, there will for example be no exclusive designer bags on the market. But craft and crafting is by no means something new, human being has always been makers and creators of things. To be skilled and competent has been defined as capable of using tools, of finding material and for using this to create useful and beautiful things.

Though craft and crafting is – and always has been - a central part of being and of human culture, these aspects are seldom discussed and researched from an academic point of view. This article is an opportunity to frame some of the ongoing research projects within the craft and crafting field and at the same time discuss some theories and methods used. One example of approaching this field is a project we have been designing for some time. From different point of views (Johanna Rosenqvist is an art historian and Anneli Palmköld an ethnologist) we have come to take an interest in how crafting, gender and performativity intertwine. The project is aimed at examining how craft is performed in different spatial and temporal situations. The starting point of view is that situated performing bodies and their movements are central to what is produced, what materials and tools are being used, and with what intentions. By investigating the performative aspects of craft we want to identify how notions of gender are renegotiated by the practitioners, who, through their choice of visual representation can confirm or challenge the importance of art and other related practices. Inspired by Judith Butler's theories on gender that is concerned with "doing" rather than "being" we want to look at craft from a gender perspective on what is being done. One important aspect of this investigation is to develop methods for participatory research, thus contributing to new methods analyzing what happens in the processes of doing arts and crafts. Gender and performativity is one way to examine craft and crafting alongside many other ways to do research on this field. In the following we will discuss some of those from different perspectives that we call research in, on and through craft. The intention is to briefly explore how craft research can be done in various fields today.

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH

International craft as a part of the Do-It-Yourself-movement is an area that has generated an increasing interest over the last few years, in part popularized through new social media (Greer 2008, Adamson 2007, Åhlvik & von Busch 2009). Many practitioners are interested in communicating their material and methodological as well as conceptual aspects of their work. This is a process of verbalizing their silent - or previously silenced - knowledge. Art historian and art theorist Jorunn Veiteberg gives many examples of it in her book *Craft in transition* from 2005.

In 2007 Nina Bondeson and Marie Holmgren published a book about the practical and conceptual aspects of art production. The book is an appeal for recognition of practical knowledge. It brings together the authors' own and others' practical experiences of communicating through their works. Practical art production is in the book defined as the art form that does not depend on text or spoken language for communication.

Through research in our respective fields of research (ethnology and art history), we observed differences and similarities concerning production in different working conditions. In art history research on craft is mainly focusing on the artefact and the artist in relation to a

context of art institutions (cf Robach 2010) as well as contextualizing the craft field itself (Zetterlund 2006 and Rosenqvist 2010). In ethnology Charlotte Hyltén-Cavallius has successfully used Actant Network Theory to broaden the scope of the individuals, the objects and their relations when looking at the home- or handicraft movement from an international perspective (Hyltén-Cavallius 2007). Rosenqvist has previously, in the thesis *Könsskillnadens estetik? Om konst och konstskapande i svensk hemslöjd på 1920- och 1990-talen (An Aesthetics of Sexual Difference? On Art and Artistry in Swedish Handicraft of the 1920s and 1990s)*, examined the specific expression of Swedish handicraft has been in different time periods, as seen in relation to the avant garde and contemporary art (Rosenqvist 2007). Palmsköld has in her thesis *Textila tolkningar: om hängkläden, drättar, lister och takdukar (Textile interpretations)* examined how a group of woven interior textiles have been interpreted in different times and place by studying the conditions for manufacturing and use from a gender perspective (Palmsköld 2007). Our special joint interdisciplinary experience derived from the textile field, which is often associated with women and with femininity (Parker 1996). This is further problematized in the anthology *Den feminina textilen* (Svensson and Walden 2005) to which Rosenqvist and Palmsköld both have contributed.

## RESEARCH IN, ON AND THROUGH CRAFT

How do we approach the craft and crafting field in order to examine it from different perspectives? We have chosen to talk about research **in**, **on** and **through** craft to describe three possibilities. By categorizing the approaches, we want to highlight the intentionality from the researchers perspective. To be a crafter, designer or artist doing research from within ones professional field, means for example doing research **in** craft, its materials and its methods. From this perspective the questions asked are related to professional skills in doing things. On the other hand to be for example an art historian or an ethnologist means to do research **on** craft, examining different perspectives when looking at craft from the outside and in a wider context. Questions asked can be related to time and space, to aesthetically or cultural historical discussions or to economical perspectives etcetera. To talk about research **through** craft means on the third hand, to start by examining craft and crafting, and by studying this catching sight of other related perspectives and knowledge.

### *Research in craft*

Our stipulated category **in** craft means that research is made from within the field of craft. The aim of the research is to understand the possibilities in doing, making, and creating objects. It can be a question of developing the craftsmanship, as in the case of the work in Hantverkslaboratoriet (or the Craft Laboratory in english) at the Department of Conservation in Mariestad at the University of Gothenborg (Löfgren 2011). The aim of the Craft Laboratory is to develop a better understanding of craft and crafting in the field of conservation. What methods has been and can be used in different conservation projects, which materials, tools and crafting methods are to be preferred and of which consequences. Another example of doing research in craft is the textile designer Britt-Marie Christofferssons work on knitting, when she for some decades has examined the technique using the question: What can one create from a pair of needles and some yarn? (Christoffersson 2009). The creator is in this example a textile designer combining her skills as a crafter and designer in order to make aesthetically interesting surfaces and expressions.

The designer Otto von Busch's extensive research could be categorized in more than one way. As for example in his presentation for the conference Otto von Busch made his paper into an exploration of the notion of "protocols". This could be the case of framing knowledge *about* craft, stating how all collaboration needs rules and that protocols are essential parts of social fabric of conventions and formalities. Protocols are used to reduce friction of the

thoroughly ritualized procedures and communication formats. However, when we bring his research in to the in-craft-category we argue that his main concern is to develop methods for working within the craft field, with the subfield sloyd as a venue. In his thesis Otto von Busch began a fruitful search for analogous or metaphorical stories (of for example hacktivism) to base his models for the world of engaged fashion (von Busch 2008). Now he turned his eye on the world of sloyd and tries to short circuit it with the world of collaborative music making and other makers. The traditional crafts share much of the same tools, materials and interests, von Busch states in his paper. Historically as well as today this has been the case. Still there is much emphasis on the individual genius rather than joint ventures or “co design”. He uses Kevin Kelly’s categories of what might promote a ”scenius” instead of genius, or as von Bush says ”the best of peer pressure”: Mutual appreciation; Rapid exchange of tools and techniques; Network effects of success; Local tolerance (Kelly 2008) to analyze craft scene could be like scene. The empirical study has just began and it is possible to follow the process at <http://www.opensloyd.org>.

### ***Research on craft***

If research on craft is a meta level of examining craft maybe we all start here to map out the framing of the field of research. Palmsköld and Rosenqvist have in their previously mentioned research been examining the terms and the frames of handicraft in relation to art and other related institutions such as “sloyd” or “folkart”. The ethnologists Viveca Berggren Torells and Eva Knuts are examining companies producing craft. Their ongoing project “Design, craft and culture” focuses the companies Vävkompaniet and Designbrenner. By investigating “cultural meanings expressed by the craft-practitioners themselves”, questions concerning definitions within the craft field are highlighted. In interviews the practitioners has been asked about what they call their production; the results and why definitions matters is discussed in the paper. Asking people owning and working in companies producing craft is an interesting point of view, often neglected in the battle over definitions such as sloyd, art, craft or design. For the companies definitions can be crucial when it comes to marketing and customer relations; and for the practitioner themselves it is a matter of identity in the professional field. Their research is firmly rooted in methodological discussions concerning visual ethnography and theoretically in the concept of knowledge in action (Pink 2007 and 2009, Molander 1993).

The artist Frida Hållander is consistently trying to prove how the arts & crafts-discourse is being made not only in texts but also in objects and their making. She insists on working on a meta-level and speaks of her contribution as a paper “on craft.” But the approach also implies a practice-based survey, which results in different doings. Hållander suggests (as an hypothesis in her paper at the ACSIS conference 2011 as well as her ongoing research process for her PhD-thesis at Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design) that the craft practice is a method to problematize and criticize our material culture. She works in a material feminist tradition trying to break up the dichotomies of for example culture versus nature and mind versus body where the one and the other are being given equal importance, such as material and bodies in relation to language (cf Kirby 2006). She puts the theory into the test in a radical gesture by literally crossing out the word craft in the notion of arts & craft – or rather making unhandicraft of the handicraft part of craft by spelling it “konstantverk”. In this hands-on-method of making her mark on the graphic representation of the words she brings in the materiality of the practice and the objects into her writing practice that refutes the hierarchical definition of the crafts from the point of view of the privileged position of the arts while calling out for a radical non-essentialist understanding.

### ***Research through craft***

Researching through craft is a way of understanding the field from within but not with the actual craft and crafting processes in focus. Frida Hållander coined the “through craft” as a matter of examining her own trade by exchanging skills with other crafts people. By using the actual practical aspects of craft, it seems to be possible to examine her craft (ceramics) through the eyes of others’. Hållander’s method – “Micro Craft Studies” as she calls it – is represented by the brief study of a class in food sculpting as held by Jurairat Nohom, reflecting on its making of a watermelon. The theory Hållander brings into the discussion is the “attached idea” of knowledge or what could be described by Karen Barad as: an ongoing intra-activity (Barad 2003). In this case between a craft objects and the craft makers.

By using the practical aspects of craft, it seems to be possible to examine and comparing practices in a broader sense. This approach seems to be the result of the relatively new advent of the artistic field of research in academia. To name examples from outside the session room in Norrköping 2011, there are related doctoral thesis in the making where the joint venture of Åsa Ståhl and Kristina Lindström is worth mentioning. They have been writing about the project *Threads -- a Mobile Sewing Circle*, which is designed to support conversations and other means of communication, also looking at how the things produced in the sewing circle might support longer-lasting, future conversations. (Lindström & Ståhl, 2010). Their artistic and academic collaboration is further developed, and at the moment the two are doing a collaborative PhD-project at Malmö University (see <http://www.misplay.se/>).

With a background in textile design and education, teaching textiles in the fashion department of Parsons The New School for Design, David Goldsmith does his action based doctoral research at the Swedish School of Textiles at the University of Borås. “Could fashion learn from fermentation?” is a question asked by Goldsmith when presenting his research project on a small-scaled linen production company in Sweden called Våxbo Lin (cf Goldsmith 2011). The company is based on historical connections to the locally early linen production, as well as craft skills and material, technical and design knowledge. In a metaphorical sense fermentation processes can be compared with small scale textile production, according to Goldsmith. In both cases one is dealing with slow processes – slow food and slow fashion. The critique of the fashion industry from a political, environmental, postcolonial and sustainable point of view is an on-going discussion. However Goldsmith means that fast fashion and slow fashion are not to be seen as contradictions; instead both production systems are needed and should be developed in a symbiosis. A close study of the company Våxbo Lin, within the research project, is in this sense an important contribution to the critical and political discussion concerning the global fashion industry and trade. He states that “localized fashion textile production and use” could be a solution to avoid the disadvantages and “problems of globalized mass-market fashion.”

So what can be learned from this? Andreas Nobel brings forth the underlying disturbance caused by the ancient old hierarchical division between technical and textual knowledge. Nobel is a well known interior designer and a PhD student at Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design. In his contribution to ”Crafting knowledge” session he described how artistic academic practices have tried to expand the category of knowledge by ”making visible different sorts of practical *knowledges*.” And he refers to recent examples of what’s at stake in the academic turn of craft education where the increased handling of texts is outmaneuvering the craftsmanship. The danger of ”gradually textualizing” a tacit understanding has been voiced before (Ong 1990). Now Nobel raises the stake by claiming his rights as an artist to leave something to the interior design to communicate (or not).

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Researching craft and the knowledge it creates can be seen as something benefiting cultural studies simply because human beings are interacting with things as users, makers and creators of things. In formulating the call for the session "Crafting knowledge" we anticipated a focus on the thing and its history, the crafted artefact and its interpretation. Instead the participants all focused on doing or the making of craft. The important aspect of what can be known, acknowledged and said and by what means, is brought up by the artistic researchers. The written word and text are not the only way of communicating, as stated repeatedly.

In future projects we want to further analyze and develop interdisciplinary approaches for the understanding of craft. It seems crucial to examine how craft is performed. We relate the context to the discussion on gender and performativity as expressed by theorists like Judith Butler and Iris Marion Young, (Butler 2007, Young 2008). Butler describes gender as a "stylized repetition of acts" which expresses itself in gestures, movements and styles (Butler 2007:219). The attributes ascribed to gender are performative, she says. Young's study of what it means to be "throwing like a girl" involves examining the movements physically as well as their spacial setting (Young, 2008). She tries to explain how the expected feminine expressions of the female body are creating physical limitations. With Butler's and Young's theories as a foundation we want to investigate the performative aspects of practical skills by focusing on how notions of gender are in practice in different artistic genres.

When taking part of Frida Hällander's discussion, we were inspired to separate the notions of craft and crafting in three aspects: in, on and through. These aspects are useful to think with when doing craft studies. We do not see them as separated from each other but rather intertwined.

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