Clay-based experience & languageness

MÅRTEN MEDBO
“The reification which occurs in writing something down, painting an image, modeling a figure, or composing a melody is of course related to the thought that preceded it, but what actually makes the thought a reality and fabricates things of thought is the same workmanship which, through the primordial instruments of human hand, builds the other durable things of the human artifice.”

Hanna Arendt
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In translation by Arabella Childs
This is an English translation of Sweden’s first artistic dissertation on the topic of crafts. The translation has been made possible by funding from Estrid Ericsons Stiftelse and Slöjdföreningen i Göteborg. The dissertation was originally published in Swedish in 2016.
ABSTRACT

Over the course of the twentieth century a doubt emerged – first within visual art and later also within crafts – that addressed the relevance of the traditional way of making art and expressed views on what was termed “empty form”. The notion that physical form is in itself no longer artistically valid is closely linked to concepts of materiality as hindrance and immateriality as freedom – all of which have had a major influence on contemporary visual art and crafts in general, and, more specifically, on what I term “theory practice” within the field of crafts. Over the past few decades there has also been increasing evidence of this influence on the field of crafts as a whole.

As a ceramist who expresses himself through clay, form has never been empty to me and clay has never been a hindrance. This dissertation is an attempt to put into context the concepts of materiality as hindrance and immateriality as freedom, and also to consider questions related to their emergence and what impact they have within the field of crafts. My point of departure is my own experience as an artist and ceramist, where inquiring and exploring takes place via practical knowledge.

I argue that there is no such thing as immateriality in art and that all artistic expression requires bodily situated craft skill of some kind in order to be materialised and communicated, as well as to take place in the world. I also argue that art should be regarded as what I term “language practice”. Through this practice I craft the concepts of “clay-based languageness” and “language-likeness” in order to come as close as possible to describing in words the kind of communication I wish to create as a ceramist, as well as what constitutes art making (“art crafting”) when conceptual artists create their art.

Viewing crafts as a language practice, however, conflicts with the theory that is setting the tone and leading the field of crafts today. I therefore both wish and propose to find a way out of this conflict-ridden situation. As part of this endeavour, I present the text-based part of the dissertation and the clay-based part of the dissertation side by side.
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Almost a decade ago, during a discussion with the artist Nina Bondesson, one of us wondered jokingly why it is easier to imagine a text-based ceramist than a clay-based political scientist. What began as a joke turned out to put its finger on something important, namely, the issue of the various statuses and qualities of linguistic materialities. Clay is my material. Its linguistic possibilities and qualities are my main interest, both in my role as a ceramist and in my role as an artistic researcher.

It has not been entirely self-evident that crafts can at all be a recipient of the type of attention made possible by academic research. Artistic research in Sweden dates back about 20 years but it was not until 2010 that crafts, as one of the last remaining fields, became an independent postgraduate research subject. At that time the University of Gothenburg became the first higher education institution in Sweden to be granted the right to award degrees in this field. The first graduate students were admitted that same year. I was one of them. Artistic research in the topic of crafts is therefore very young.

Initially there were thoughts of including crafts within the already established postgraduate studies programme in design. Staff at the Crafts Department of HDK felt differently and pushed for independence. Funding to do a research initiation study was applied for and granted. The study was published in 2007 under the title *Tiden som är för handen – om praktisk konsttillverkning* (Bondeson & Holmgren 2007). The authors of the report were then-Professor of Textile Art Nina Bondeson and Marie Holmgren, who was in charge of the Master’s Programme in Applied Arts. The work to make crafts an independent postgraduate research subject was successful. In 2008 Anders Lindseth, now Professor Emeritus of Practical Knowledge at Nord University in Norway, was attached to the Crafts Department and given responsibility for postgraduate studies. Crafts, with their special history and distinctive nature, make it possible to open up new perspectives within artistic...
research. It is therefore with gratitude that I look back at the work that was done to establish crafts as an independent postgraduate research subject. That work was a prerequisite for the dissertation presented here.
Introduction
I have given my dissertation the title Clay-based experience and languageness. I acquire clay-based experience through my work as a ceramist, and via that work I find myself in the midst of clay-based languageness. Quite simply, my research is about how this clay-based experience and languageness can be understood and placed within a contemporary context.

In my role as a ceramist I have always wanted to get my linguistic material – clay – to speak. In this respect I am like all other artists who give form and materiality to their artistic ideas. Artists express something through their art. They do this in various ways. Some use clay, others wood, some their own voices and bodies, and yet others use words and concepts. This list could be longer. There are innumerable examples of artistic materialities. All of them have their own distinctive nature. I regard them as being different forms of language. This viewpoint stems from my experience expressing myself through clay as a ceramist.

At the beginning of my artistic career I never doubted clay’s linguistic potential. I rested in the certain conviction that clay was a valid artistic material. Today I cannot say that I am equally sure. A doubt has crept in. This is mainly due to external circumstances. The 1990s were the start of an era of major changes in the view of how relevant craft should be defined. It is possible to describe the period of changes that craft is now experiencing as a theoretical turning point. A question mark can be placed on clay’s artistic relevance within the new paradigm that is emerging. Indeed – in fact, on the validity of all material-borne forms of expression. Ideas about “empty form” have gained ground. The path ahead is leading away from materiality and towards immateriality. These ideas are relevant to me. I have realised that my own practice can be included in the doubt that has been raised about crafts’ material-based languageness. My research addresses the issue of how this doubt can be understood and whether it is possible to find routes out of it.

When I discuss artists and art here, I do so based on the broad definition of the concepts. In this context, craft persons and crafts will therefore sometimes be referred to as artists and art respectively.
The questions that are then formulated are very general, while also very personal. One fundamental concept within the research field – practical knowledge – that has most clearly inspired my own research is that knowledge of a general nature can be extracted from critical reflection about practical knowledge – that is, knowledge that is personal and manifests itself in action. It is this very type of knowledge that enables me to practise as an artist and a ceramist.

The issue of doubt can be made more precise. It deals with art’s linguistic potential. Some forms of expression are currently being doubted. There is a view that some materialities are not capable of bearing any relevant message. Clay-based languageness, which is the focus of this dissertation, can be included in their number. Art’s languageness thereby acquires a crucial significance in this context and a series of questions can be raised about it. To start with: does it exist at all? Is art a language? If so, how does a language function and how can a language be defined? If art is a language – or a plurality of languages – then what differentiates art’s languageness from other types of languageness? And what unites it with other types of languageness? Last but not least, how can clay-based languageness be understood? It is my opinion that art is a language practice. I base my own reflections on ideas about language and languageness that have been expressed by such philosophers and thinkers as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michael Polanyi and, to some extent, Hannah Arendt. This theme of language runs throughout this dissertation but is developed in particular in Chapter 4.

However, before the theoretical investigation into art’s languageness can begin, it is necessary to shed light on crafts and their role in the artistic creative process. Art’s languageness has its origin in craft. It is with the help of their crafting skills that artists can make art materialise and take on concrete form in this world. This relationship holds true for all the linguistic materialities of art, even those which are usually defined as immaterial (see pages 146–147). Chapter 3 consists of a phenomenological consideration of craft, with particular focus on its communicative side.

After exploring art’s linguistic status, in Chapter 5 I examine more closely the questions that have been posed about how art’s various materialities and languagenesses should be evaluated and
how they are ordered hierarchically. Here the current theory construction about crafts will be of particular interest. The ideological roots on which the theory practice rests will be explored, so that we can better understand the present situation. I also suggest alternative ways of regarding art and crafts, in the hope of opening up alternative paths for a theory practice that wants to foster art’s multiplicity of voices and linguistic riches.

In Chapter 1 I revisit specific points along the timeline of my own practice. I describe three episodes that have been of particular significance to me. This is my recollection of events that in various ways shed light on and provide perspectives on my artistic practice. It is through them that my research questions take on concrete form. It also becomes clear how the questions are linked to my own professional experience. These narratives form the starting point of my research and also ground it.

In Chapter 2 I write about my background, and here, too, I use the narrative form to some extent. I do so in order to encompass as many aspects as possible of the artistic practice. I give an account of my path into the world of ceramics and of how I regard art. The aim is to create an understanding of, and insight into, the professional conditions under which I operate as an art worker. As a researcher, I believe it is important to give the best possible account of my own driving forces, standpoints and perspectives. By supplying a background to my own position and by actively trying to make it visible, I hope to facilitate a critical reading of the text of this dissertation and a critical interpretation of the clay-based End Note (see page 177).

Chapter 6 consists of a reflection about methodology and in the same chapter I also attempt to situate my research relative to that of others.

With my research, I am operating within the field of artistic research, and I therefore feel it is necessary to include an artistically manifest element in my research. Because I am a ceramist, this dissertation’s artistically manifest element is, of course, clay-based. The clay-based section comprises the dissertation’s End Note. The result is thereby a somewhat
unconventional end note. Whereas the text-based section can be understood as a reflection about my clay-based experience, the clay-based section can be regarded as a contemplation of my academic experience. In my experience as an academic, the text, the concepts and issues of knowledge and views about knowledge have taken up a lot of space. This is reflected in the End Note and a meta-level is created in the dissertation. The End Note can be described as comprising an artistic and clay-based reflection about the academic text-based reflection I have done as a doctoral student.

Personally, I consider the text-based and the clay-based sections to be equally important and necessary elements of the research presented here. The clay-based and text-based sections can be read separately. Of course, reading the one will affect how the other is read. It is my view that the richness of perspective and the depth will be greater if the two sections are interpreted in relation to each other. I have no opinion about the order in which they should be read and interpreted.

The End Note was published at an exhibition under the title Slutkommentar in spring 2016 (Medbo 2016) and consists of five clay-based works with the titles: Thinking through craft, Enlightenment, Homo Capax, Lerbaserad språklighet (Clay-based languageness) and Wheel-throwing from inside. There is also an appendix which presents some ceramic works that were created outside the framework of this research. They have the titles: Crowd, Hairy, Velvet Worm and Hose. These works are discussed, directly or indirectly, in the text section, and I felt it was valuable that they could be experienced physically together with the other works at the public showing of the End Note. Photographic documentation of the exhibition is included at the end of this publication. Video documentation is also accessible in the University of Gothenburg's open archive GUPEA: http://hdl.handle.net/2077/46894
METHOD AND APPROACH

I have already mentioned that my research is linked to already established research within the field of practical knowledge. As a reflection about my own professional experience, my research is therefore in no way unique, but instead connects with an already established academic field. Methods that were developed at the Centre for Studies in Practical Knowledge at Södertörn University in Sweden and the Centre for Practical Knowledge at Nord University in Norway comprise the model for the research. In concrete terms, this means – as I have already mentioned – that particularly important memories can be used as the foundation of and starting points for a reflection about the professional practice in which I am engaged.

The attempts to portray memory in words create an opening for a first reflection. Is the narrative correct? Was that how it was? Was that how it felt? The narratives are not included in order to reproduce something that is unequivocally true. They are included because they provide the possibility of accessing the lived experience that I want to explore here. When I feel that a narrative agrees with the experience I am trying to describe, then new questions can be formulated. What is the narrative actually about? What is at stake? In the next stage, the circle can be expanded and the reflections can be linked to external references relevant to the questions generated by the original narrative. The narratives are important. They comprise a possibility of accessing the practical knowledge, which otherwise tends to shy away from the more explanatory verbal-linguistic tools.

This is thus partly about a type of bodily situated knowledge that does not let itself be captured in words. Sometimes this type of knowledge is therefore sloppily called “silent”. This silence is then defined based on the spoken and especially the written language. For me as a clay-based practitioner, my practical knowledge is anything but silent. Above all, it speaks via the artefacts that we clay-based practitioners create. It also shows itself directly, in the practice itself. Colleagues (and others with similar insight) have
the ability to decode, or read, that which reveals itself in and through the practice. Those of us who have the necessary training can therefore reflect about, develop, pass on and understand the “silent” knowledge. With the right (clay) training, it is also easy to speak about those aspects of knowledge where speech is relevant. In this regard, the silent knowledge can already be said to meet all the requirements that can be placed on an independently functioning form of knowledge. The form of knowledge is only silent to those people who have not practised their ability to listen.

THE READERS AND INTERPRETERS OF THE RESEARCH

The research presented here touches on many of the fundamental issues of art and crafts, and I therefore believe that this work can be of some relevance to the art field in general. In this instance, it is primarily aimed at people who are interested in the linguistic dimensions of art and crafts.

Parts of this research, however, have a more targeted focus. I would like to contribute to the theory construction about the theory practice of crafts. This aspect of the research is thus aimed in particular at all the people who are participating in the contemporary theory practice of crafts or who are impacted by its effects. In this case they consist mainly of participants in the field of crafts.

I am thereby also trying to reach out to people who do not already possess the understanding that comes from having their own artistic practice. I have therefore striven to open up and make accessible a practitioner’s perspective. The practitioner’s perspective is, I imagine, primarily of interest to people who do not already possess one. To my colleagues, my descriptions of my practice may surely sometimes be experienced as superfluous and from time to time perhaps also trivial. But by creating a shared and deeper understanding of the ceramist’s practical knowledge, it becomes easier to reflect critically about the body of knowledge and the framework that surrounds it.
SOME DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Having come this far, I would now like to conclude the introduction by defining some concepts commonly used in the dissertation. My aim is first and foremost a practical one. During my dissertation work, I have noticed that great confusion arises around concepts such as art, crafts and handiwork when I as a craft person (and artist) use them. For example, as a practitioner, am I an artist or a craft person or both? Do I make art or crafts or both? Who is who and who does what? It is not impossible that I have already created some confusion in the introduction, and in all honesty, I can say that I myself am not totally clear about how I should best label myself and what I do. But I will do my best to minimise the conceptual confusion.

Historically, the term “art” has been used to refer to skilled craft, and even today the concept is used in such a way. The art of cooking, the art of medicine, and the slightly more modern art of plumbing are some examples of this. Nowadays in everyday speech the word is used to mean something else. When I use the word “art” here, I do so in its general and broad meaning. I thus include in the concept all forms of expression that can be regarded as being of an artistic nature. Accordingly, it includes crafts, music, dance, painting, poetry, film, theatre and so on. According to this definition, everyone who makes art can be described as an artist. This means that I as a craft person and ceramist will sometimes call myself and my colleagues artists and the results of our activity as art. I take this opportunity to note that the general understanding of the concept of art is also based on the idea that art is “personal innovativeness”. 4 That has a certain significance in this context.

Because the word “art” in its everyday usage, in addition to the broad understanding I have sketched out, can also be specifically used for visual art and its more modern offshoots, I will use the term “visual art” as a collective concept for all the contemporary art forms that

4 “It was not until during the 18th century that art became the specific concept for forms of expression such as visual art, architecture, crafts, music, opera, theatre, dance and literature. Along with this meaning there also followed the presumption that those works that are called art have as a condition a personal innovativeness.” (Sandström 2016) – from Nationalencyklopedin.
have developed from visual art (video, photographic, concept, performance art, etc.) Contemporary art is accordingly categorised under the concept of visual art. Of course I also include in the concept those art forms that originally comprised the core of the concept of visual art, such as painting, graphics, drawing and sculpture. I will develop the concept of visual art throughout this text, and in those cases when I deviate from the above definitions, I will try to be clear about it.

In the text I describe art and crafts as fields. Fields are such a well-established concept that most people who read this text can be expected to understand what they mean. But for the sake of clarity I will nonetheless refer to the following quotation from the introduction to a collection of texts by Pierre Bourdieu, who concisely captures the key issue in this context: “Briefly, a field, battle-field, field of competition, is defined by the fact that people gather around something shared that they believe in and fight over” (Broady & Palme 1993 pp.16–17). Something to keep in mind is that these fields are not autonomous and isolated from each other. In the case of visual art, crafts, design and handicrafts, the various fields can affect each other and partly overlap. There are also forces outside the fields which affect the fields in question without having any primary interest in them. Within visual art, in addition to the art field, the closely related concept of the art world is also used. One difference between them is that through the concept of the art world, particular interest is directed at the people who own the power to define and single out something as being art. Alongside these concepts, reference will also be made to the art and crafts scenes. The word “scene” refers to the place where art encounters its public.

I also say some words about the concept of craft. In this dissertation, special interest is paid to craft and the concept will be made more precise and developed on an ongoing basis throughout the text. I will give a starting point here. In everyday life, the concept usually refers to some kind of manual work that results in products of a material nature. We can add that craft is work whose result depends on the practitioner’s personal judgement and skill.
This means that the practitioner has control over and thereby the ability to put their personal stamp on the work’s result. When the word “craft” is used in this text, these results do not necessarily have to be of a permanent nature – they do not necessarily have to leave behind any artefacts. Here the spotlight is on artistic creativity, and according to the definition of craft in this dissertation, such phenomena as dance, theatre and music can be understood as the results of various craft processes – that is to say, practices that are experience based, manifest and in some way involve situated, bodily knowledge.
Chapter 1

Three episodes in my practice
THE CAGE
Gustavsberg, summer 1987

someone had put up a notice in the corridor of Konstfack’s Department of Ceramics. The Gustavsberg porcelain factory wanted throwers over the summer. That sounded good. I was a first-year student in the Ceramics and Glass programme and needed a summer job. I applied and got it.

Attached to the porcelain factory in Gustavsberg was a ceramics museum. I was told to report there on my first day at work. It turned out that I was hired by the museum and not by the factory, as I had first thought. The museum director welcomed me and showed me around. There was a café adjoining the museum. In the centre of the café was a glass cage. It was intended for me – I was supposed to sit in it and throw pottery on the wheel for the next two months. It didn’t feel good. This was not at all what I’d imagined when I’d applied for the job. I’d thought I would be sitting together with the other throwers at the factory and throwing on the wheel.

In the café I had some colleagues who were also there demonstrating various ceramic techniques. Pirio and Anna-Lena added grapevines onto the Blå Blom service. Luigi also worked there and ran a porcelain painting workshop where visitors could paint their own cup or plate. I was the only one sitting in a cage. Otherwise there was a risk that I would splatter the café patrons. My colleagues showed me the clay cupboard. There I found white stoneware clay. I’d never encountered such a clay before and it was not called clay at the factory but rather “S-body”. It felt like a mixture of fine putty and clay. This clay or body could be described as a slave to gravity – it was saggy and reluctant to obey – it was hard to throw. I was not given any particular instructions about what to throw. The main thing seemed to be that I did it. So I started throwing as I wanted to. Despite everything, after a couple of hours I had gotten the hang of the clay somewhat and had succeeded in creating some shapes that I felt were acceptable. Perhaps this job

The names of my colleagues are aliases (with the exception of Sven Wejsfelt).
would work out okay anyway. And Pirio and Luigi turned out to be pleasant. They had a sense of humour and joked freely with the café patrons, each other and me. We had fun together. Anna-Lena was more reserved.

After lunch that first day, a thrower and designer at the factory came down to me in the café. His name was Sven Wejsfelt. He was accompanied by a young, muscular thrower called Sandro. I wasn’t going to be making my own creations after all – I was to throw pottery for the factory. Sven gave me three drawings of vases that I had to throw. The shapes were complex and would have been difficult to throw even with the clays I was used to. My spirits sank again. It felt like I was fighting headwinds but there was no room for discussion. I pulled myself together and began working on the shapes. Sven came down to me once or twice a day to see how my work was progressing. At first things did not go well and together we agreed that everything had to be rejected. I thought the vases in the drawings were fairly ugly but that wasn’t why we tossed them out. It was my craftsmanship that failed.

Although I felt these particular vases were quite ugly, I liked many of the things that had previously been made at the factory. With regard to thrown ware, I was particularly fond of Berndt Friberg’s production. Berndt and Sven had similar backgrounds. Both had begun working as throwers at a young age and both had gradually progressed to positions as independent ceramists/designers with responsibility for their own production at the factory. They had been colleagues for many years and were also close artistically. In terms of craftsmanship, Sven was in no way inferior to Berndt. It felt terrific to be able to have Sven as a master teacher.

During that summer I learned to master the S-body and to throw vases that won Sven’s approval. Thanks to him, I had gained the necessary skills. Sometimes I was allowed to go with him up to his studio, where he gave practical demonstrations of various throwing

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6 Berndt Friberg (1899–1981) is considered to be one of the major names in Swedish 20th-century ceramics. He also had an international reputation. Sven Wejsfelt (1930–2009) never received the kind of artistic recognition that Berndt Friberg did. (Eklund 2011, pp. 72, 111–123)
techniques. That was important. In retrospect, I can say without hesitation that it was Sven who gave me a deeper insight into the art of throwing. I realised that previously my throwing skills had only been basic.

It felt good to know that I had received some degree of recognition from Sven. But this also resulted in the glass cage starting to fill up with drying pots. The vases had begun to obscure the view for the café patrons. For that reason, a trolley was wheeled down from the factory. I filled its shelves with vases and Sandro came down to fetch them. He appeared stressed and we quickly rolled the trolley along. When we came to roll it over the threshold of the door separating the café from the factory area, the trolley lurched and most of the vases fell to the floor. Anna-Lena, the woman who worked with the Blå Blom service, got angry and scolded Sandro for his carelessness. Sandro just smirked a bit in reply. I did the same, even though I was deeply affected by the event and felt strangely sad.

What emotions hit me there in the doorway between the museum café and the factory? A heap of vases broke. Perhaps that is enough reason to feel sad? But that’s making it all a bit too simple. I had been involved in producing ceramics too long for that to be shocking. What happened in the café was an everyday event. Everyone who works in ceramic production is very well aware that what is made risks being broken during the process. The fragile unfired ware is often damaged while being handled, as in this case. Nor are dry cracks uncommon. During the firing process the ware is also at risk of cracking, being deformed, or in the worst case exploding. Glazes can run, boil, creep or craze. In addition, in this case it was not my own artistic endeavours that broke. I was working as a paid thrower and would be paid for my work regardless of the vases’ subsequent fate. So there was no reason to be particularly sad over an everyday ceramic event, when some – in my opinion quite ugly – vases met their fate.

Could there have been a rivalry between Sandro and me? Could the event be interpreted as him being deliberately careless? Even
though we were both young, just over 20, and possibly competed for Sven’s attention, I do not believe that this can explain my reaction either. If I’d believed he had done it on purpose I would probably have been angry, not sad.

Before I started at Konstfack I had worked for three years at a small pottery studio, first as a trainee and for the last year as an employee in the production process. My work largely involved throwing. I had a strong belief that throwing was central to ceramics. Something that one had to be able to do if one wanted to work as a potter or ceramist. I continued to believe this even after I began at Konstfack. And in my world, Gustavsberg was one of the places that confirmed this belief. Throwing was important.

The industrial art tradition that Gustavsberg represented impressed me. Designers, ceramists and artists such as Berndt Friberg, Anders B. Liljefors, Tyra Lundgren and Wilhelm Kåge, all of whom had been associated with the factory, played and still continue to play a major role for me and for my beliefs about ceramics and ceramic art. During the summer I had, to a minor extent, become a living part of the tradition at the factory. This had involved effort. The summer had been arduous in many ways. The shut-in vulnerability I could experience inside the glass cage was stressful. There was something fundamentally violating about the fact that the reason I was given the opportunity to learn to throw was that I simultaneously functioned as entertainment for the café patrons. The throwing process itself was also demanding. The work required both my physical and intellectual abilities. At the same time, I became enthralled by throwing and eager to learn as much as possible. Sven therefore became an important person to me. We both took it all seriously. He shared his knowledge and it was he who transformed me into a thrower.

One thing I have not yet mentioned is that a mood of almost gloom and doom permeated the factory at this time. Everyone was more or less aware that Gustavsberg’s days were numbered. The once-vibrant ceramic tradition represented by Gustavsbergs Porslinsfabrik was most definitely crumbling away. It was rumoured that Gustavsberg was planning to move some of its production to low-wage countries in Asia, or had perhaps already done so. Many people had been let go from the factory. This development
was naturally painful to many of the employees, and the mood at the factory was bleak. My time spent in the cage at the café partly insulated me from this, even though I was not wholly unaware of the problem. Sven Wejsfelt was very involved in the factory’s future and still believed at this time that it could be saved. His hopefulness was slightly contagious. Later I understood that many of the employees held a far gloomier view of the situation.

Looking realistically at this whole situation, Sven was the last link in a tradition that could be seen as doomed. The fact that he nevertheless so seriously took upon himself the role of teaching me, a Konstfack student hired for the summer, to throw is touching. And perhaps it was also a little touching that I was so willing with the same degree of seriousness to learn what he had to teach. It is clear that I was not wholly insensitive to the situation. Presumably I already had an understanding, if partly subconscious, of where things were heading. When the vases broke there in the café, my subconscious understanding suddenly became a conscious one. While practising my craft, I had been engrossed in a special way. Like all seriously minded craft people, I was involved with what I did and perceived meaning in it. Now that meaning had been called into question. The tradition I was striving to become part of was dying. All in all, I believe this is a fairly good explanation of the strong emotions that were aroused by the incident in the café.

I will now go back in time two years. The year is 1985 and I am at Grundis, a one-year preparatory art school.
THE MECHANICAL MODEL
Münchenbryggeriet, autumn 1985

with the aim of getting into Konstfack, I had applied to
and been accepted at Grundis, which was the popular name
for Grundskolan för konstnärlig utbildning. It was a one-year
preparatory art school. The training was broad and we got to try
out many different forms of artistic expression. We were taught
such subjects as textiles, painting, croquis, drawing, sculpture
and graphics. For some subjects, such as croquis and drawing,
the training continued for the entire academic year; for others
it was divided into blocks. I thrived at the school. It was the first
time I had ever felt happy in a school situation. I was among
friends who shared the same interest as me and had teachers
who were engaged and knowledgeable. Having the opportu-
nity to try out all the various artistic techniques hands on was
interesting, fun and educational.

After a while it was time for the sculpture block. I was par-
ticularly looking forward to it. The sculpture teacher was called
Jörgen Hammar. He was well known at the school and was said
to be a skilled instructor. On the first day we began by doing
clay modelling of reclining models. After a couple of hours of
modelling, he walked around among the modelling stands and
gave each student’s work the label “cowshit” or “horseshit”.
My work was horseshit. That was naturally not fun to hear
but horseshit turned out to be a good mark. It meant that the
model had not run out onto the base in the same way as cowshit
tends to do. The label of horseshit meant that my work was
judged to be vigorous and have stature. Jörgen convinced me
that I had a particular talent for sculpture. My belief grew as
the training progressed.

After a few weeks of training, Jörgen
showed us some student works from
the previous block. One of them was
the study of a model in contrapposto
made of steel wire and white gauze
bandages. He emphasised its genius.

7 When I began the training
in 1985, the Södra Latin
secondary school had taken
over responsibility for the pro-
gramme, whose of f icial name
at that time was Bild och Form
(Image and Form).
The contrapposto element of the study had been reinforced and highlighted by dyeing some of the bandages red. Contrapposto is the position where a standing model is supported on one leg and relaxed on the other. This makes the hips and shoulders lean in opposite directions. For the model this means, if the position is to be held for a long time, that some parts of the body are under more strain than others. It was these parts that had perceptively been dyed red. When he spoke about this talented student and her model study, it prompted a degree of envy in me. I decided to try to match the study. I was not exactly sure how I would do that but from that day onward my thoughts were consumed by it.

Normally we sculpted in clay and plaster but for interested students it was possible to work in other materials in the small workshop belonging to the sculpture studio. It contained some basic waste materials of the type that is often found in a not very well-tidied studio: bits of particle board, left-over wood, steel wire, nuts and screws and various other waste materials. By this point, an idea for a kinetic sculpture, which would be able to move mechanically, had been born and begun to take shape. I cannot say exactly how this idea originated. Whatever the case, it was the contrapposto explicitness that the teacher had praised in that sculpture that I would try to match. As a result, my sculpture also took contrapposto as its starting point. Because my idea included mechanics, I understood that clay would be a poor choice of material. To implement the idea, I was forced to abandon my well-known clay for other materials. At first I was very unsure whether the idea was even possible to do. And, even if it was, I was unsure if I had enough capacity to do it. But my curiosity and enthusiasm for the idea overcame the doubt. And because my project was to be done outside of the scheduled lessons, I really didn’t have much more to lose than my time.

I constructed an articulated figure out of waste wood, chicken wire, string, gauze bandages, nuts and screws. Against the back edge of a piece of particle board, I attached a two-inch thick, vertical strip of wood that was slightly longer than the figure. Its function was to keep the figure in an upright
position. I drilled three holes into the wood strip and three corresponding ones into the figure: one in the centre of the back of the head, one in the back between the shoulder blades, and one in the centre of the pelvis. The pelvis, torso and head were thus pin jointed and moveable in relation to each other. I nailed the figure's feet to the particleboard. I then used three rods to fasten the figure to the strip of wood in the drilled holes. The figure was now standing upright. Its head, torso and hips could twist themselves relative to each other. The ways these body parts were linked to each other made the reciprocal pattern of movement between them match the body position of a model in contrapposto. I attached the hand of one arm to one hip and the other to the figure's head. All were in accordance with a classic contrapposto pose. Using thick steel wire, I created a crankshaft with a hand crank and attached it to some pieces of wood nailed to each side of the bottom plate in front of the model. I fastened a couple of crank arms made of thick steel wire from the crankshaft to the model's knee joints. By turning the crank, I intended that the model could be made to move and thereby change its supporting leg.

True enough, when the crank was turned, to my delight the figure began to move as I had planned. The torso, hips, arms and legs moved in relation to each other. At the end points of the cranking process, the model adopted the exact contrapposto I had striven for. However, when I cranked something else also happened that I had not expected. The cranking process linked the person who was cranking to the sculpture in a special way. It created a kind of intimacy between the sculpture and the person who was cranking. An intimacy that was almost embarrassing. Because another surprise was that, when it was cranked, the sculpture moved in a way that could be described as very sensuous. Or, to put it another way, lewd.

Dumbfounded, I understood that not only had the idea been realisable as I had hoped, but that it also contained more dimensions and a greater depth than I could have predicted. The finished sculpture was better than the sculpture that had existed in my thoughts. The creative process I had been involved
in was breath taking and in its end stage it had filled me with euphoria. These were strong feelings. Never before had I felt anything like them.

The feeling that my sculpture communicated with and influenced its interpreter also became very evident. I observed that many of its viewers, just like me, were drawn into their encounter with the sculpture. For the person who was turning the crank, it seemed difficult to be indifferent. I liked it.

Artistic creation can be fulfilling and joyful. As an artist I value this aspect of the creative process highly. Ever since that experience, in my sculptural work I have sought out that joy when I create. I also believe that this joy positively affects the artistic result. The story about the mechanical model points to some factors that are important to creative joy. The moment when you realise that what you have created is richer and greater than what you had originally imagined is centrally and intimately linked to this joy. Previously, as a trainee potter and thrower, I had sometimes felt pleasure and satisfaction in my work. But I had seldom been surprised and I had never felt a joy comparable to that which I experienced in my work with the mechanical model.

This feeling could be most closely compared with childhood games when they were at their most intense. As a child, I not infrequently experienced play to be so fulfilling that my perception of everyday space and time was disrupted. There arose a condition of openness in which most things felt possible. The play's logic and reality took over those of daily life. I imagine that this ability to become involved is central both to joyful play and to the joy-filled artistic creative process.

What play and art have in common is that something is expressed through them. As a ceramist I often draw attention to the clay but my involvement is with the idea of what is to be expressed and not primarily with the clay. However, because what is to be expressed is to be conveyed via clay, often the clay naturally also becomes involved and points to other directions than the one I had originally planned. The clay has its finger in the pie.
Finding one’s way to a joyful and open creative process is not easy or self-evident. The joy cannot be taken for granted. Long periods of time often pass without it appearing. Unfortunately, it also seems to me that joyful creativity becomes rarer as the years pass. That is a pity, because I am convinced that joyful creativity increases the chances that the art will turn out well.

The episode I have described also made me understand something about the communicative power borne by art. In the narrative it becomes clear that I was surprised by the sculpture’s ability to affect its interpreter, whether that was me or someone else. Before I began at Grundis, in my role as a trainee potter I had not thought much about art’s ability to affect and communicate. At least, not in the way that my work with the mechanical model had made me do. In the art of pottery making, forms of artistic expression are often fairly subdued. They exist in relation to function and must subordinate themselves to it. Nor is it self-evident as a potter to perceive oneself as an art worker. As a result, at first I did not clearly perceive the artistic aspect of the pottery making tradition. But in the case of the mechanical model, the communicative aspect of the artistic creative process became very obvious. The way in which the sculpture engaged the viewer, and in a purely concrete way linked the person who turned the crank with the sculpture, made it impossible not to perceive that its form of expression made an impression. This insight into art’s powerful ability to affect and communicate has been of decisive importance to how I regard art. My time at Grundis strongly influenced my beliefs about art and about the way in which I understand myself as an artist. It was there that I took some early and important steps on my journey to discover my own artistic form of expression.

Acquiring your own artistic language means in some way that you personally build limits around your creative process. Every artist must – if for no other reason than the sake of their professional survival – try to place their creative process within an external context. Based on the context you create, a view of art is formed that can be more or less conscious. This view of art associates the artist with certain positions and ideas within the art field. All stakeholders
within the art field can be said to have some form of opinion about art – that is, a view of art.

My own view of art is crucial to how and why I have engaged in art and crafts and, not least, in the practice-based research represented by this dissertation. Some of this view of art has already become visible through my narratives, and I aim to make more of it visible and to return to this topic in Chapter 2.

I now jump forward in time. The next episode occurred during the initial years of the 2000s – almost 20 years after my time at Grundis.
A CRACK
Gotland, in the years just after 2000

some ten years after i graduated from Konstfack, when I had gradually begun to feel established as a ceramist and artist, I experienced a change within the field. At first it was a feeling but later it impacted me more definitely.

In 2002 the Swedish Arts Grants Committee presented the study Det är konsthantverkets tur (It’s the turn of crafts) by Susanne Helgeson (2002). The aim was to find ways to strengthen crafts’ weak position within the cultural field. As a result of the discussions, the project Craft in Dialogue was launched in 2003. Its goal was to strengthen Swedish crafts on the international stage. The Swedish Arts Grants Committee initiated the project and IASPIS was mandated to operate it. It ran for three years until 2006.

This was something I welcomed. Crafts needed whatever attention they could get. It was encouraging that the field was now clearly of cultural policy interest and that the project was given a relatively large amount of resources. I confidently looked forward to the project. But as time passed, I felt more and more strongly that this was a project that really did not address itself to me and to my colleagues who worked in a similar way to mine. I had not previously regarded myself as representing any particular direction within the crafts field but rather considered myself to be a fairly average practitioner. Despite this, it now seemed as if I had cause to regard myself as representative of a particular direction – one that was not welcome within the Craft in Dialogue project. A crack in the field seemed to have occurred. There was an “us” and a “them”. How could this project – as I perceived it – have chosen to shut out parts of the field?

The question forced me to become engaged and try to find out how this crack in the field could be understood. Gradually I comprehended that it was about artistic communication. Or, in fact, about the lack of communication. The crack could be explained as a conflict between two ways of looking at art. To put it simply, as either a conceptual
or a material-based way of relating to art and its content. From the conceptual perspective, criticism was aimed at the material way of creating art. That made me think. What was I really being prompted to say through my clay? In what way did my forms of expression have validity?

This third narrative relates to the mechanisms that create movement within a field. It is about the outer frameworks that practitioners must adapt to. All actors within a field have their own agendas and wishes, and they try to influence these frameworks. The general understanding of the concept of crafts is one very important part of this framework. The participants have varying possibilities of exerting an influence on the frameworks. Some do it by making crafts and others do it by judging, valuing and categorising those same crafts. Some work against the current, others with it. Some have great power of influence, others less.

The field of crafts belongs to those concepts that can be classified as fundamentally disputed (see Janik, 1991 pp. 29–30). By this is meant that the debate about how to understand and define the concepts can never be expected to end. Other concepts that can be included in this category are, for example, democracy and art.

I had not previously thought much about either the concept of crafts or whether I communicated anything through my works or not. For me, my work as a ceramist had been about my capacity to create meaningful artistic statements with the help of clay. I had believed that with the help of my skills with the craft and the material, I had had an ability to work with the clay so that it became communicative and thereby meaningful. I knew that in each individual case, I could not be sure I would succeed in charging the clay with meaning. The work of being an artist is risky and there are never any guarantees that you will achieve the statement you are trying for. During the process, I was also often uncertain about what statement I was trying to achieve. But I never doubted that I had an ability to express myself through clay and that at least some of the statements I created possessed artistic validity. I believed in my linguistic instrument – in the craft and the clay.
As a new graduate of Konstfack I had, not surprisingly, perceived myself to be a member of a new generation of craft people. A generation who, like the generations before us, challenged the older generations’ perceptions of crafts. Perhaps the movement within the field of which Craft in Dialogue was a part could be understood as a younger generation’s questioning of the older generations? To the extent that a crack in the field of crafts did exist, might it perhaps be viewed as a normal expression of a generational conflict?

Maybe. But as I see it, there is also something here that cuts deeper into beliefs about art and artistic content. It is not just a matter of the usual generational conflict in which there is a struggle over issues to do with taste, where one aesthetic preference is put in opposition to the other. To use a language metaphor: it was not about an intra-language disagreement about style. It was about the language itself – in my case, clay – and its ability to carry a content. What was clear was that the rules of the game had been rewritten and that there had thereby arisen a mistrust of the linguistic validity of the clay-based communication of which I was a part.

Doubt about art’s linguistic potential runs like a red thread through the last hundred years of visual art and visual art theory. At the end of the 1990s, this doubt finally also impacted crafts with full force. Through my narrative the lines of conflict become clear. At stake is the conflict between the valid linguistic form and the valid linguistic content. In this context, these lines by the critic and art historian Peter Cornell are illuminating; “In modern art the repetition of old forms has almost always been regarded with suspicion and tradition as a natural opponent. People have instead, in the words of the American critic Harold Rosenberg, created a paradoxical ‘tradition of the new’” (Cornell 2014, p. 43). In such a tradition it is possible to be critical and suspicious of the linguistic materiality that conveys the artistic statements. That is, the means – or the materiality – which an artist uses to articulate themselves. That means can be considered to have been used up and emptied of its artistic possibilities. Art operates within the contemporary paradigm of innovation and boundary breaking, and tradition (not least the crafts tradition) is easily perceived as being the very antithesis of innovation. That leads to the view that some crafts and
thereby also some materialities are obstacles and not means (see further Chapter 5). These perceptions, conscious or unconscious, possess a surprisingly great effective power within both contemporary visual art and contemporary crafts. And, above all, within both fields’ theory practices.

CONCLUSION

The first two episodes, “The cage” and “The mechanical model” both say something about maturation into a professional role. In the café at Gustavsberg I dedicated myself to the knowledge of a craft. Looking back now, I can see that was where I became a thrower. The narrative also makes it clear that my identity as a thrower became complicated early on. At Grundis I gained an understanding of the differences between a craft-led creativity and an artistically-led creativity. That was where I also began to perceive myself, at least potentially, as an artist. I became aware of how intense and joyful an artistic creative process could be. Joy became an important artistic driving force. In the concluding narrative, there arises a question and doubt about my way of working as an artist and craft person. I realised that my way of understanding and creating art could be seen as problematic.

These narratives open up various perspectives on the practice of art. Based on these perspectives, some questions can be formulated. How should the relationship of a craft, such as throwing, to artistic creativity be understood? And can clay really be considered – as I had taken for granted – to be a valid artistic means? And, if so, how can clay’s linguistic potential be used to create relevant artistic content? Where, how and who decides the issue of what is valid artistic content? These are questions I will discuss in this dissertation.
Chapter 2

Background and view of art
I understood early on that artists are expected to develop their own language and find their own voice. This is not particularly strange. According to the prevailing view of art, it should be personally innovative and, if not innovative, then at least personal. In all the art courses I have taken, I have therefore been urged to find my own language, unlike in my crafts-focused courses. In those, I was instead urged to work carefully, persistently and patiently. When I was a trainee potter, my task was to imitate what the potter did as closely as possible. The primary goal for a craft person is to meet the standard set by his or her predecessors. A difference thus arises here between the artist’s and the craft person’s way of looking at their respective practices. In craft, one is expected to be a follower of the tradition. To the extent that the individual craft person contributes to the tradition’s development, it usually occurs anonymously. New knowledge is added to the tradition – usually without any beating of drums and blowing of trumpets – as a self-evident contribution to the collective advancement of knowledge.

In art it is different. Admittedly, there it is also customary to follow the prevailing tradition. However, in the contemporary art tradition, the artist is not supposed to be anonymous or to faithfully follow in the footsteps of their predecessors. On the contrary, the artist is expected to step forth and is encouraged to break boundaries and question their predecessors. Even though it has been claimed that visual art’s modern, progressive-optimistic and boundary-breaking tradition has reached the end of the road (Karlholm 2014), the view of the artist as a boundary breaker continues to be very important in art. In crafts and in the individual craft person, these two different approaches meet. It is an interesting but not entirely problem-free co-existence, which in my case leads to a certain amount of tension in my professional identity.

Having one’s own language is based on the fact that as an artist, you have your own opinion about art and what is important about it. You must decide what type of art and what artistic direction is right and proper, and perhaps also why. After you have taken a stand, you must then yourself try to live up to the ideals associated
with your choice. The artistic practice, and above all the works of art resulting from it, say a lot about the underlying ideology. But they do not say everything.

Sometimes a gap emerges between the views one has as an artist and the reality one encounters while practising one’s profession. It is not uncommon for artists to feel misunderstood by their surroundings. The emergence of this feeling can be caused either by an inability in the artist or those around them to understand and interpret the forms of expression and put them in context. Therefore, even if much can be read from the artistic practice, it does not necessarily convey everything about the artist’s own perception of themselves and their art. A reasonable supposition is that the closer an artist’s ideals are to those ideas which at that particular moment have a dominant position in the field, the more probable it is that the artist has not thought about their own ideals.

MY STUDENT YEARS

Why does someone become an artist? Why a ceramist? In my case, it was a combination of coincidences and interest. When I had to choose a direction after compulsory education and prepare myself for a future career, I did not dream of becoming either an artist or a ceramist. True, in junior high school I did take ceramics as an option. I liked working with clay a lot but I never thought that this interest might indicate a future choice of career. At secondary school I chose the three-year natural science programme because it was said to be the one that allowed for the most possible subsequent choices. In my second year at secondary school I ended up on a collision course with one of my teachers and chose to leave that programme. By chance I had seen that St Göran’s secondary school in Stockholm was starting a new programme in specialist craft trades. I applied and was accepted to the programme’s pottery line of study. I thereby began my career path into ceramics and over time also into art.

Before that, though, I had had ceramics on my schedule at junior high school. It was there that I first seriously became
acquainted with clay, and it was out of that experience that my impulse to apply to the pottery line of study emerged. My junior high school had a relatively well-equipped ceramics workshop with a potter’s wheel and kiln. The clay’s malleability was fascinating. It responded immediately to my attempts to shape it. I got to try out throwing on the wheel. It was fun but difficult. But what made the strongest single impression on me were the metamorphoses that the clay underwent on its path from a plastic malleable material to hard, glazed ceramic ware. By being fired, the clay changed colour and became hard and water resistant. The clay we used was blueish grey when wet and became terracotta coloured after it was fired. After the fired object had been glazed and fired a second time, it changed again. It could acquire almost any colour and surface at all. Ceramics captured my interest to such an extent that three years later (1982) I began a line of study to train to become a potter. For four days each week I worked as a trainee at a pottery studio and one day a week I had lessons with the other trainees at St Göran’s secondary school. My classmates included gem setters, wigmakers and hatters, plasterers, saddlers and so on. The two-year programme had been launched because the old apprenticeship system in many narrow and specialised craft professions, which had traditionally transmitted craft skills to new generations of craft people, had stopped functioning.

The pottery studio where I trained was fairly typical of its time. It had been founded some years before I began as a trainee there, and the business was only very loosely linked to more original pottery traditions. True, we produced utility ware, but we used a fairly artificial white stoneware clay imported from the Netherlands. The ware was fired in an electric kiln and we glazed it with bought glazes. We mainly made mugs, bowls, jugs and outer flowerpots. Some items were decorated. Popular motifs were owls, seagulls and clouds. The production was sold at trade fairs, mainly to gift shops and flower shops. The production rate was high and quantity was prioritised over quality.

Fairly soon I began participating in all the production stages of the pottery studio, even throwing, and as I began to feel more at ease in my role, I also became increasingly convinced that ceramics
was something I wanted to devote my future to. At first I imagined a future as an independent potter or as an employed thrower in a production operation similar to the one I was already in. What interested me the most was the craft itself and a striving to master it. I wanted to become quick and sure, and make things that met the demands of form and function that could be made on them. At the pottery studio we made useable objects, and in addition to the focus on speed, the key emphasis was function.

I gradually realised that there was a difference between ceramics and ceramics, and I realised that the pottery studio I was training at was not the right place to develop and deepen my ceramic skills. In retrospect, it is easy to say that I did not achieve any great degree of craftsmanship during my trainee period. I did, however, gain the basic skills and an understanding of the production conditions at a small-scale pottery studio. After having completed the two-year educational programme, I remained at the studio for one more year as a thrower. I then looked for other opportunities. My first choice was to get a job as a trainee or assistant at Gustavsbergs Porslinsfabrik. As I have already explained, I was impressed by the ceramics made there and I felt that it was the place where the most advanced ceramic knowledge was preserved. I applied for a trainee position at the factory but was told that they had no need of new trainees.

I had once visited the annual exhibition of Konstfack graduation projects, and so I knew that Konstfack offered a ceramic programme. Perhaps that could be an alternative now that the door to Gustavsberg was closed? I applied several times without being accepted. I thought that was strange. I considered myself to be quite capable in the ceramics field. Surely that would qualify me for Konstfack? Clearly not. I was lacking something and did not understand what it was. When I expressed my disappointment after having been rejected for the second time, an old student friend from the crafts programme explained that I had to attend a preparatory art school to even have a chance of getting in. It was not enough to possess the craft skills and be able to work on the wheel to be accepted – special artistic training was also necessary. I had not understood this. I followed this advice and applied to Grundis.

My time there was of particular importance to my artistic
development. The school’s focus lay in doing work in the studios. My views about art grew out of discussions with the instructors and other students about the works we made ourselves but also about those of already established artists. At times the discussions were lively, particularly at Jessika Kempe’s lectures on art history. She was a good teacher with the ability to really get her students involved.

One instructor had a particular influence on me. That was the sculpture instructor Jörgen Hammar, who I mentioned in the story about the mechanical model. Jörgen was a teacher who freely shared his own knowledge and skills as an artist. He made a strong impression. I particularly remember his expressive graphic works. His images had room for both the humorous and the deeply existential. The same was true of his sculptures. He used unexpected materials, often everyday objects, which he reused in his sculptures. His works revealed a fairly imaginative and rapid creation process. They were brutal in their form but tender in their content. Through Jörgen’s art works, it became clear to me that art was for everyone. It was not raised up above human life but was in its midst. I experienced his art as democratic. It lay open and was accessible. It belonged to everyone. Even me.

In the introductory chapter I described how fulfilling I found the process itself when I made the mechanical model. I did not understand that then, but Jörgen was also interested, and still is, in the creative process in itself.

In his biography Hammar he expresses it like this: “To do art, the child that one always carries with one throughout life must be whole and vital. All artists of any stature have that childlike desire to create. The key is just to not let the rest of the world and reason destroy this contact.” (Hjertzell 2009, p. 96). He continues: “It is the child’s privilege to be able to play so untroubled by and independent of every preconception about what is real or not real, beautiful or not beautiful. [...] It is about distancing oneself from what is aesthetic and towards spontaneous creativity – what is original” (Hjertzell 2009, p. 52).

The biography describes how Jörgen Hammar does not avoid forms of expression that might be viewed as trite, pathetic and
sentimental. His approach could perhaps be described as naïve – he also uses child’s play as the model for his creativity. But at the same time – or perhaps because of this – I perceive in his art great seriousness and great sincerity. The subject matter he is interested in can be said to be about what it means to be human. About the vulnerability and fragility that each individual must encounter, but also about life’s hilarious side. “Pain and humour, suffering and joy live side by side in Jörgen Hammar’s works. Art as serious play” (Hjertzell 2009, p.119).

If I now try to describe my own creative activity, it is clear that there are many points of contact between my artistic approach and what I perceive to be Jörgen’s. Through my art I want to get at fundamental emotional and existential issues. I believe that all aspects of human life deserve a place in art. Humour and seriousness, life and death, love and hate, elevated and trivial, the appealing and the repugnant, surface and depth; in brief, everything that has to do with human life. I see no reason to avoid topics that are apparently childish and naïve. It can be a way of getting in contact with human depth. In my art, I want to link together things that are perceived to be in opposition to each other. This way of perceiving art and its purpose is related to the Art Brut movement, for example, which Jörgen also cites as a kind of model for his own art.

There are similarities but also differences in how we relate to art. I am imprinted by my crafts background. As a craft person, I retain the fundamental desire to create a well-crafted object as seen from a craft person’s perspective. Like Jörgen, I can consider a prevailing aesthetic viewpoint to be something to question but I bring with me aesthetic views that from a craft perspective do not necessarily have to be transcended or disputed. Therefore, even when driven by an artistic intention to create something ugly, I will want to do it in a skilled and honourable way in terms of its crafting and materials. This is a relationship that I am stuck with for better or worse. Even if it can be asserted that the crafts tradition is on a collision course with the prevailing artistic tradition, and is considered to be an obstacle to it, it is also the case that the more craft skills I gain, the more varied and precisely I will be able to articulate myself. Of course, though, there is also a risk of losing one’s artistic
Skrattet (The Laugh) 1983, Jörgen Hammar.
way in the midst of one's craft proficiency. But the risk of going astray is not related to the craft itself. It has to do with inadequate wisdom in how to apply craft skills. And the problem of inadequate wisdom does not apply exclusively to craft skills; it applies to all the fields of knowledge of artistic practice.

As I discussed earlier, as an artist I like it when opposing pairs can co-exist well side by side. Accordingly, I welcome the craft person/artist conflict that is built into my professional identity. In my view, this conflict is important for my personal expression. It adds energy and colour to my artistic practice.

Following my year at Grundis I again applied to Konstfack. This time I applied to both the sculpture programme and the ceramics one, and was accepted into both. Choosing between them was not easy. In the end I chose ceramics. At Grundis I had been able to dip my toe in visual art. I was tempted to choose that route but ultimately it felt too insecure. I was more secure with ceramics. I knew that I had some skills with clay and I could rest assured in that knowledge. I began my studies at Konstfack in the autumn of 1986. It was a four-year programme with the option of a postgraduate year. After the excursion I had into the world of visual art and sculpture, Konstfack meant a return to the creativity of crafts, which at that time was still fairly oriented towards producing utility ware.

Konstfack’s Ceramics and Glass programme was a kind of hybrid education. It trained both independent craft people and designers for the industrial art field as well as all categories and combinations in between. The professors – Signe Persson Melin and Oiva Toikka – who were in charge of my education were both influential designers in the industrial art field. Many students nourished dreams of future careers as designers in the glass and ceramic industries. Such dreams were also awakened in me.

At Konstfack I did not encounter any one individual instructor who had the same decisive importance to my artistic development as Jörgen Hammar had had at Grundis. Instead, my experience was that the instructors had a fairly distanced, perhaps even distant, way of relating to us students. To a great extent we had to shape and
be responsible for our education ourselves. Even though we students became close to each other due to this situation, the environment was also fairly tough and permeated by internal competition. In this context, though, I would still like to single out our instructor Kennet Williamsson. He was an exception and greatly involved in the teaching process. He was also the one who drew my attention to the great artistic wealth that exists in the pottery-making tradition. Just as with Jörgen Hammar, it was by spending time with Kenneth Williamsson’s artistic creations – his wheel-thrown objects – that the door was opened to the pottery-making tradition. It was inspirational to access his great knowledge about, and genuine interest in, that tradition. Despite this, my own ceramic interest was overshadowed during my time at Konstfack. The field of glass, which was new to me, attracted me more.

During the first year we received a three-week introduction to glassblowing at Orrefors glasskola (Orrefors glass school). The training licensed us to use the new glassworks that was opened in the same year I began at the school. In terms of handcrafting, there is a crucial difference between working with glass and working with clay. Because the glass is so hot, it must be shaped with the help of tools. Compared with clay, glass exists at a distance. Another difference is that glassblowing is a social activity. It works better to blow as a team. At that time, in the mid-1980s, blown glass had a special allure. Back then, the studio glass movement was relatively new and in its perhaps most expansive and dynamic phase. The designers in the glass industry were famous and received a lot of media attention. Glass appeared to be at the centre of events. If glass as a material could be perceived as exclusive and showy, the opposite was true of working at the glassworks. Blowing glass is physical. It is heavy, hot and sweaty. Inside the glassworks it is smoky and the burning-hot glass means that beginners, at least, can perceive the work as dangerous. Glassblowing has a dramatic quality to it. Lumps of glass fall off pontils to bounce uncontrollably across the floor. Gatherings acquire their own lives, become impossible to control and run inexorably off the blowpipe. For the non-beginner, the work instead involves an ability to become a precisely fitting cog in the choreographic performance that a skilled blowing team displays. Glass attracted me.
I shared my interest in glass with my fellow students Gunilla Kihlgren and Per B. Sundberg. We blew together as often as we could. Only in exceptional cases was a knowledgeable instructor present who could guide us through the blowing process. Gunilla did have some previous glassblowing experience. She shared her knowledge but our work together was characterised by a lack of any obvious authority figure to guide it. There was a generous and boundless spirit. Initiatives and ideas arose spontaneously during the work and were jointly developed in the moment. Our intensive work together did not turn me into any particularly skilled glassblower and I have not blown glass myself since then. But I still gained a lot from that work in the glassworks. For my own part I practised my responsiveness to and understanding of the creative potential that is inherent in crafts. I also gained an understanding of the handcrafting conditions that apply to hot glass. This knowledge was useful after Konstfack, when I rented space at Ajeto Glassworks in the Czech Republic and got the glassblowers there to produce my ideas. Over time, working with glass has become a smaller and smaller part of my professional activities. But my experience of glass has noticeably influenced how I think and work with ceramics.

My time at Konstfack broadened my orientation within the field of art and crafts and increased my technical knowledge. I also became part of a context and gained a network, which was significant. But I do not believe that my basic artistic approach was really influenced very much by my time at Konstfack. If I were to try to describe the prevailing trends at Konstfack during my years there, I would say that it was a time characterised by colourfulness and expressiveness. “Neo-baroque” and “kitsch” were words used to characterise the student cohorts who graduated from the Ceramics and Glass programme in the early 1990s. These words are also a fairly good description of my works.

Dubbel vas (Double vase), 2001, Mårten Medbo. (height: approx. 35 cm, blown by Mirek Barkovsky and his glassblowing team at Ajeto).
PROFESSIONAL LIFE

The years after Konstfack were intensive. My attempts to establish myself professionally coincided with building a family and becoming a parent. As a result, it became important that my artistic work could help to support us. At the pottery studio where I had been a trainee, the potter had been able to earn a living from his work, and at the beginning of the 1990s it was natural for me as a new graduate from Konstfack to imagine my future as a potter of utility ware.

Yet there still existed a hesitation about whether the path I had chosen was really the right one. The successful utility ware potters I knew of had all worked for a long time, often for decades, to reach their positions. This route appeared to be long and difficult. And, it must be admitted, in the long run I became bored with making utility ware. I had difficulty keeping my work sharp. When I was hired as a part-time firefighter in Kräklingbo, where I lived, and the financial pressure eased somewhat, I could think along different lines.

I began working on pieces that were more unique. They still had a utility aspect but that now became subordinated to artistic expression and was sometimes only rudimentary. I also worked in a similar way with glass. With this new approach, I followed a tendency in the crafts field that manifested fully during the 1960s (see Robach 2010), namely, crafts that drifted away from their previous utility association and instead approached visual art in their forms of expression. Previous practitioners who followed this direction include Herta Hillfon, Anders B. Liljefors and Ulla Viotti. During my years at Konstfack I had sometimes worked in a similar way and I now allowed myself once again to let loose a wilder, more spontaneous and more expressive side of myself. It suited me better, and fairly quickly I found my way to a ceramic style that I felt artistically satisfied with. In conjunction with this new way of working, I almost

Döskallekoppar (Skull and crossbones cups), 1994 (height: approx. 6 cm).
ceased throwing on the wheel. Until then, it had always had a central role in my practice. To the extent that I still used the wheel, the results never reached the world outside my own studio. Instead, I did casting. Inspired by glassblowing, I began experimenting with balloons. I filled them with various things, such as flour, compressed paper balls and potatoes. Then I sucked the air out of them. They then functioned as the originals from which I created ceramic casts.

I received a good response to these freer creations and thereby also the opportunity to exhibit them regularly. I consider my second solo exhibition at Galleri Inger Molin (Medbo 2001), entitled Keramik (Ceramics), to be decisive. There I presented my balloon works for the first time. The exhibition was well received by the public and the press (Wall 2001). The expressive, organic, abstract style that I had found my way to felt interesting and developable. I felt that I had found a path that I could follow and develop for some considerable time.

Almost ten years had passed since I finished my studies at Konstfack and I now began feeling established in the crafts scene. That feeling more or less coincided with my experience that the field and thereby the view of crafts had changed, and that it was thereby possible to put question marks around the artistic form of expression with which I was working. I touched on this in the introductory chapter.

As I gradually came to understand the issue, it had to do with a new way of looking at craft. There was one kind of craft that could be described as “empty”. It “only” involved form. And then there was another kind of craft that was capable of carrying and conveying relevant content. Its artistic form of expression could more easily be conceptualised and

Teapot, 1995 (height: approx. 15 cm).
contextualised. Quite simply, it was easier to discuss in words this type of conceptual craft than it was to discuss the type of craft that I was doing.

This was relevant to me. Until then, for me art had been about finding one’s way to a form of expression that impacted its interpreter bodily and emotionally. The communication that was established through this type of art was largely not conceptual. It was true that it was difficult to describe in words any concrete content in the works I created. If I did attempt to do so, it was in fairly vague and general terms. Based on the often implicit, but sometimes also explicit, criticism that was directed at the type of craft I made, I felt a need to reconsider my practice. It felt important to express a clearer content. I am sure it was mostly a matter of convincing myself that I could clearly communicate something concrete through clay in a way that could receive approval within the new paradigm that was being established. I really never doubted that the type of expression I had been working with up to this point conveyed a relevant artistic content. However, within the new crafts paradigm, the prerequisites for relevant content seemed to be that it could be described in words. My attempts to become clearer about the content were therefore
conditional, and I took it upon myself to retain something of the beyond-conceptual languageness within which my art had existed until then.

I still wanted my artistic statements to be accessible and to not shut out observers who lacked access to the interpretive keys that contextualised and concept-based art often requires. So even if I contextualised and equipped my art with a conceptual superstructure, I wanted my art to also be able to function without it. My ambition can perhaps be perceived as contradictory: I wanted to be clear in such a way that it would be possible to speak verbally about a content in the art, while at the same time I wanted to retain something of the sensory and beyond-conceptual languageness that was characteristic of the art I had previously been creating.

I did, however, have an idea about how I could achieve both these goals, and I will now describe in a fairly detailed way what I did. In doing so, I have a dual purpose. Partly, it is a way to describe how I handled in my practice the artistic doubt in which I had ended up. And partly, I hope to convey a picture, by taking a snapshot in time of my artistic practice, of what an artistic process can look like in practical terms. How impulses, coincidences and the material itself – the clay – play a role and influence the path from idea to finished result.

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9 All artistic creativity exists within some kind of context. In that sense, all art is contextual. I am not referring to that context here but rather to the context with which the artist actively and deliberately equips the art.
As I mentioned earlier, I worked as a part-time firefighter in the village where I lived. It is a job that gives concrete experiences of life and death. Along with the sense of being useful, the work also gives birth to feelings of inadequacy and shortcomings. I wanted to communicate thoughts about these feelings and experiences through my ceramics. I would be speaking based on my own concrete experience, which would also make it easier to be very clear. I also thought that the concept would work well with the prevailing popular trend of turning extremely personal experience into artistic content. However, the creation process itself felt difficult. Never before had I worked from an ambition to convey such a clear narrative. I didn’t really know what I should do in purely practical terms. How could the experiences I wanted to manifest be given ceramic form?

At this time, while I was working with clay, I was also working with glass. On my way to and from the glassworks in the Czech Republic where I made the glass, I sometimes passed Dresden in Germany. On one of my trips I had the opportunity to stop and visit the Zwinger Palace’s collection of early Meissen porcelain. It made an impression. It was in Meissen that the Europeans, much thanks to Johann Friedrich Böttger’s persistent work, finally succeeded in breaking the Chinese secret and making porcelain themselves for the first time. (see Gleeson 2000). When this happened at the beginning of the 18th century, it caused a sensation. It was so sensational that Böttger himself was imprisoned by his patron, August the Strong, so that the secret could not be spread further. At that time, porcelain was highly exclusive, so the discovery had great economic importance. At first, most of the production in Meissen consisted of copies of the Chinese porcelain. But after a while, it appeared – based on what I saw in the collection – that the makers of the porcelain were struck by the insight that it was actually possible to create almost anything with the material. Fanciful rhinoceroses, elephants and lions, mocking farm boys with snot glaze running from their noses, graceful figurines and fabulous tableaus. The key to porcelain’s secret was the kaolin. It seemed as if the reins were initially held very loosely and there was a spirit
Porcelain elephant from the Meissen Porcelain Manufactury (Johann Joachim Kändler)
of great creative freedom. Nor, of course, was there any prior European porcelain tradition to relate to.

I was particularly interested in the figurines and the tableaus they formed. They were burlesque, fable-like and storytelling in a way that pointed to a possible method of achieving the clear and narrative communication I was looking for. I had now identified a possible form for my idea.

Together with his classmates, one of my children had played with small stuffed animals since starting school until it was time to attend junior high school. They constructed worlds and populated them with the animals. The animals were given human characteristics. The children sewed clothes for them and gave them names. Shortly before the children were to start at junior high school, the game changed character and my son and his buddies got together to deconstruct the stuffed animals. They cut them up and sewed them together again in new ways. It was fascinating to see and gave me yet another idea about how I could work with my creative process. One thing I realised was that there was something to be said for working with my theme in a fable format. It would thereby be easier to end up with an emotional appeal. If my figures were cute, it would be harder to distance oneself emotionally from them. I also thought it would be smart to cast the figures. I was already familiar with this technique. Then, just like my son and his buddies, I could deconstruct, reshape and reconstruct the figures as I needed. This was because casting is a technique that in principle only repeats one and the same original cast. Making a cast for each figure would have been crazy. I had previously experimented with a ceramic surface structure that resembled velvet or towelling. With this, I could give my work something close to a textile look. This would help me reinforce the fable-like cuteness.

During our short training, we firefighters were encouraged to discuss with each other what we had experienced during the call outs, especially if those experiences had been emotionally stressful.
That didn't work very well. Without guidance, it turned out to be difficult for those of us in the group to speak about the emotional aspect of our experiences during the call outs. When doing our job, we functioned in a socially very limited area and we were very aware of our obligation to maintain professional secrecy, which made it impossible to talk with relatives about the call outs. For my part, this lack of processing the sometimes weighty experiences meant that my work in the studio became charged. It acquired not only an artistic significance but also a therapeutic one. I believe that it influenced the physical portrayal and further heightened the emotional level.

By now, the concept was developed enough that I could begin working in the studio. I started with a small stuffed animal. I emptied it of the stuffing and resewed it so that it better suited my purposes. Then I filled the little teddy bear with sand and made two plaster casts. In one the teddy bear was lying down and in one it was standing up. The setup was actually quite poorly thought out in technical terms. The bears had to be reshaped and reconstructed, and it turned out that based on the casts I had made, I was forced to cast a large number of bears in order to get the parts for a single new bear. Due to the poor plasticity of the casting clay, the parts were also difficult to

Velvet, 2006, Mårten Medbo (the object in which I used the "velvet surface" for the first time)
work with and assemble. When doing similar work later on, I cast the figures in parts, which makes the process far more rational. But the technically awkward and slow process gave me time to explore more deeply the emotions that were to be manifested via the teddy bears. The work was tentative and required much bodily involvement. I was forced to use my own body as a tool to stage the emotions I wanted to capture in the bears. They were so small – no taller than about 20 centimetres when standing up. In all essential details, the statement I was trying to attain had to be manifested through the bears' reciprocal relationships and body postures. Due to the scale, the possibility of working with their facial expressions was limited. I gave them fur by using the velvety surface structure. The glazes became blood and running tears. Gradually I felt that I had the whole thing into some sort of order and I felt satisfied with how my ceramic knowledge had been used in the work. I felt that it confirmed and illustrated that in clay there existed a distinctive linguistic possibility. I created my own tableaus with the bears. Everything revolved in one way or another around the firefighter theme. I gave the various tableaus names such as Trauma, HLR, Konstgjord andning, Psykosocialt stöd, Fritt intervall, Stor skadeplats (Trauma, CPR, Artificial respiration, Psychosocial support, Interval of normality, Major incident) and so on. The names related to the professional terminology we used in the emergency services. I named the whole collective work L-abc – livsfarligt läge, andning, blödning, chock. (Life-threatening situation – breathing, bleeding, shock – the Swedish first aid ABC – translator’s note.)

An exhibition had been planned at which L-abc would be shown. Because I had now deviated from what might have been expected of me, I was extra nervous. But also filled with expectation. I felt that I had succeeded in capturing my subject matter: life and death, hope and despair, comfort, care and vulnerability. The work possessed the clarity I was striving for. It would be possible to capture and account for content in words. The work met the communicative requirements I had set. I also felt that via this work I could make a statement as a participant in the theory construction of crafts. The idea was that I demonstrated the significance of the material, the craft and the form in an era when questions were being asked about the artistic relevance of these aspects.
Trauma, 2007 Mårten Medbo (length: 20 cm).

Debriefing, 2007, Mårten Medbo.

Psykosocialt stöd (Psychosocial support), 2007, Mårten Medbo (height: 21 cm).
The exhibition (Medbo 2007) went well. Many people came and, according to the gallerist, Inger Molin, many of them were emotionally moved by the exhibition. This was in line with my intentions with the work. The exhibition also attracted media attention. (Arvidsson 2007; Eklund 2007; Strandqvist 2008)

However, my idea that my work would be perceived as a statement in the crafts debate was not realised. Neither in the media nor within that part of the field I could otherwise survey was the work taken as a contribution to an ongoing theoretical debate. Overall, though, I was satisfied with the work with the teddy bears. My ability to express myself through clay had become better. Another insight was that I could continue to work in all my previous tracks. These could be allowed to run in parallel and then eventually cross and merge in the future. I did not need to abandon anything; I just had to add to it. This was also consistent with my already existing perception of the artist’s role. As an artist, you have the freedom to go in the direction you want with your art. And express what you want. I wanted to view the artist as a free agent.

MEANINGFUL THROWING

Wheel throwing has a central role in this dissertation. The introductory narrative from Gustavsberg is about throwing. In the next chapter I will use throwing as an example in order to explore the phenomenology of crafts. My path into the ceramic world had been via the potter’s wheel. My identity as a thrower is deeply embedded in me and influences my artistic identity. I will therefore pay particular attention to throwing in this chapter as well. I do so despite the fact that my thrown production only comprises a small part of my artistic production over time. However, it is an interesting part of the context that has an ability to surprise. One where it also turns out that many ideas, not least my own, are put to the test.

Perhaps in art it is impossible to make theoretical statements through an art form that follows what is considered to be an already established tradition. Among other reasons, because of the fact that it is hard for the field to identify a deliberate theoretical ambition when the art does not clearly break any stylistic norms or is otherwise recognisable as boundary breaking.
After Konstfack I had been on my way into the pottery tradition of ceramics, but halfway into it I had turned back to the artistically freer direction I had previously had at Grundis and even at Konstfack.

On my way into the tradition, I had thrown on the wheel. On my way out, I basically stopped throwing. Throwing is intimately associated with the pottery tradition. It is not easy to use the knowledge outside that context. But even though I no longer threw as actively after my turnaround, I continued to consider how the technique could be used in a practice that was ever more clearly moving in the
direction of fine art. Almost ten years managed to pass from when I totally let go of my ambition to produce utility ware in about 1996 until I once again allowed throwing to assume a place in the outward-looking part of my practice.

I made a number of objects that were thrown and then put together with extruded or thrown components. They more or less revealed the fact that I was using throwing as a method. My way of harnessing the skill of throwing fitted fairly well with the expressive, abstract organic ceramics I was working with at that time. In a commentary in Dagens Nyheter one such object (see photo) was tersely described as “a perversely repugnant and meaningless brownish creation” (Nandorf 2005). It had been included in the exhibition Beauty and the Beast (Jackson [curator] 2004) in London. The exhibition aimed to present an alternative picture of the Swedish design and crafts scene. The British curator, Lesley Jackson, wanted to highlight what was wild and unruly and exhibit it side by side the cool blond theme that was the prevailing image of Swedish crafts. The verdict in the newspaper was perhaps not very uplifting but the photo of my object had been given a lot of space. That negated to some extent what stood in the text. So despite the fairly hard verdict, I was pleased with the attention. I felt that I had succeeded in reclaiming throwing as an artistic method. Of course, the fact that the object had been selected for the exhibition also contributed to that feeling.

However, an alarm bell should perhaps have rung when the object was described in the newspaper as meaningless. In retrospect, I realised that I had heard precisely what I didn’t want to hear. I already doubted whether I was capable of creating the artistic meaning that I wanted through throwing. I preferred that the world would perceive my thrown objects as communicative and meaningful. So my doubts continued. As did my throwing.

Gradually, and fairly surprisingly to me, my thrown objects found their way to a place in the antiques scene. That is, the scene for modern Scandinavian design. In the crafts scene, where I was otherwise active, they never attracted any significant interest. However, all things considered, the antiques scene’s interest is perhaps not so strange given that I am partly schooled in the Gustavsberg
industrial art tradition. It is fully conceivable that it is this closeness to that tradition which attracts the antiques scene, where ceramic industrial art has already held its rightful place since earlier times. Perhaps this scene was receptive to the forms of artistic expression that I was trying to create via my throwing. In a way, the kinship is fairly obvious. I work in stoneware with the same type of glazes that characterise the industrial art tradition. There are also similarities in terms of the craftsmanship and the throwing techniques. But of course there are also differences between me and the throwing artists and designers at Gustavsberg. My objects cannot be classified in the same way as those by, for example, Friberg and Wejsfelt, under the minimalistic, modernistic aesthetic that characterises their works. Where their works are restrained, mine are expressive. In my works, the associations are clearer to more ostentatious ceramists such as Anders B. Liljefors and the early Herta Hilfon. But the one ceramist my works most clearly relate to is certainly Axel Salto, who worked for Royal Copenhagen (among others) for a couple of decades in the mid-20th century.

To attract attention in the antiques scene and receive recognition by being associated with the extinct industrial art tradition was not really the kind of recognition I was seeking. But in its own way it felt like an honour. However, overall I still doubted throwing's potential as a means of artistic expression. I should add that my doubt about the artistic quality of thrown objects is merely a doubt. That is why I am not ceasing to explore throwing's expressive possibilities.

In the midst of my doctoral work, something happened that turned upside down the somewhat problematic picture of my own throwing that I have portrayed. Via the contact in the antiques trade who had bought and resold my thrown production, I was invited to participate in an exhibition of contemporary ceramics and glass in New York (de Pury & de Pury [curators] 2014). Through the contact, my objects had been exhibited at trade fairs in Europe and the USA. There, they had apparently attracted some attention, and it was in one such context that they had come to the attention of the exhibition's curators. My co-exhibitors were said to include names such as Ai Weiwei, Sterling Ruby, Rosemarie Trockel and others. It all sounded rather strange but my contact gradually
From the series Crowd 2014 (the series was begun in 2006), Mårten Medbo (height: 35 cm).

Velvet Worm, 2006, Mårten Medbo (height: 30 cm).
convinced me that the context was serious. The curators, Michaela and Simon de Pury, were interested in including objects from the Crowd series (see photo). That surprised me. I could never have imagined that those objects would have taken me into such a context.

I had the opportunity to attend the exhibition opening. Some of the other artists also came but none of the big names turned up. However, the art was there. Takuro Kuwata’s works made a particularly strong impression on me. All my objects were sold on the first evening, so I had reason to feel satisfied. But there were some complicating factors.

In this context, it became very obvious that art is a commodity like any other. That was not surprising. It was an exhibition at a commercial gallery - that is, outside institutions such as museums and public art galleries that are labelled as non-commercial. Both the curators had a background from the auction world, where art's role as a commodity is perhaps the most obvious. The prices at the exhibition were staggering. That is also applied to my objects. I myself had not been involved in setting the prices, and their levels rather shocked me. At the same time, the high prices were nothing that I would benefit from directly. The circumstances around the exhibition were unusual. My contact had purchased the objects from me prior to the exhibition. I had already been paid. I had thought the payment was okay. I received what I was used to getting, but that amount was only just over ten per cent of the price that a customer at the gallery had to pay. That is made me feel frustrated and reduced. The artistic value did not belong to me. Not financially, at least. The entire context had an unpleasant aftertaste.

The exhibition received media attention. Most of the interest was aimed at one of the curators as an individual, but some critics also paid attention to the exhibition’s artistic content. For my part, I received both praise and criticism. In The New York Times, Roberta Smith wrote (2014): “other efforts are skillful but derivative, [...] Marten Medbo’s bulbous conglomerates, which tame and regularize evocations of Louise Bourgeois and the great potter-sculptor Axel Salto” and in CFiles Garth Clarke wrote (2015): “If you like creepy there are Marten Medbo’s pustulating (spellcheck hates that word) forms. Among the more powerful works in the show,
these are covered in sagging blisters that invite touch even though they might burst, releasing God knows what”.

Throwing had proven to be able to open the doors to an art scene that I had never really imagined I would gain access to. The critique praised the quality of my works’ craftsmanship, which to me as a thrower was of course satisfying. My works’ artistic reception was more mixed, so on that point my doubt will have to partly remain. Via my thrown production and the rumour about the exhibition in New York, more doors had been opened to the visual arts scene. But it is possible to sense an uncertainty in how the world at large relates to the objects. They have no self-evident right of residence in the worlds of either art, design or crafts. And perhaps that actually makes them more interesting? My ambition is to continue my exploration of throwing’s potential as a means of artistic linguistic communication. So far, it has been an interesting journey that has proven to offer surprises. I would like to add that, through the work of other throwers – be they famous or obscure, dead or alive – I am personally convinced that it is possible to throw in an artistically meaningful way. My doubt is above all personal, and centres on how my knowledge of throwing can be used in a fruitful way in relation to my artistic desire and ambition and the framework within which I am able to operate.

THE POETICS OF CLAY

All the linguistic materialities of art carry with them their own particular problems and possibilities. In this dissertation, where clay-based languageness is the central focus, it can be fruitful to look more closely at how some of my colleagues relate to and use this languageness. Thus far, I hope I have given a fairly good picture of my own relationship to art and to clay’s linguistic potential. I will now compare my way of looking at and using this languageness with how two of my colleagues use it.

11 In autumn 2015 I had the opportunity to exhibit at Galleri Christian Larsen (now Larsen Warner) in Stockholm. The gallery is one of the established visual arts galleries in Stockholm. The exhibition (Mårten Medbo) ran from 14 November to 19 December 2015.
In 2007 I saw Klara Kristalova’s exhibition (Kristalova 2007) Katastrofer och andra vardagliga händelser (Catastrophes and Other Everyday Events) at Galleri Magnus Karlsson in Stockholm. I had heard of her before and had seen some of her sculptural works, mostly in bronze and plaster. This time her works were ceramic. In terms of their craftsmanship, her works were not that advanced but I found her responsiveness to the material’s inherent possibilities to be extraordinary. There was something contradictory and disappointing in this. Whereas the craftsmanship appeared simple, the artistic statements contained great precision and accuracy. The sculptures were sketchedly done, rather like three-dimensional drawings in clay. Technically, they were created according to the same principle as a coil pot. It is a classic ceramic method. Sculptors who sculpt in clay have traditionally used sculptural methods. The clay is often means that the artist sculpts in solid clay. The clay models are then usually used to make castings of the original. The clay is thus a transitional form and no considerations of firing and glazing need to guide the clay work. In contrast, such thoughts clearly guided Kristalova’s works. Her sculptures were hollow, like pots. Hollowness is a prerequisite for being able to reuse large ceramic forms. They were painted with oxides and body stains and then glazed with a transparent glaze. The glaze was thick and during the firing it had run and dripped, and sometimes made the underlying colours run with it.

The thematic world was dreamy, peculiar and sometimes frightening. Her sculptures were magnificently unpretentious. They had a striking universality and directness. Plus a depth that made one linger before them. I was, perhaps somewhat naively, surprised that an artist outside the crafts sphere was capable of using clay as she had done. She had succeeded in doing something with clay that surprised me, despite my ceramic background. My surprise may partly have been due to the amazement of seeing ceramic works with such clear crafts influences at one of Stockholm’s most established galleries of contemporary visual art.

My encounter with Klara Kristalova’s ceramics changed my relationship with clay. I realised that the material contained greater artistic potential than I had previously imagined. Kristalova used traditional ceramic techniques and methods. These were techniques
that I knew well and that usually occur mostly in a crafts context. In one way I therefore also felt a little cheated. Even though she lacked a ceramic education, she had access to a clay languageness that I did not. Kristalova understood and perceived ceramic possibilities where I was not capable of seeing them.

In 2012 I was Kristalova's discussion partner at an artists' debate held by Gothenburg Museum of Art in conjunction with the Klara Kristalova exhibition. She said that she had not done much work with ceramics during her studies at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm (nicknamed Mejan in Swedish). It was an interest that came later. There were practical reasons why she began to work with ceramics. It was easy – just buy the clay and start. But another factor was that the material was also charged with meaning. At Mejan she had heard that she should avoid ceramics. People had said: “Whatever you do, don’t do glazed ceramics!” Glazed ceramics was a forbidden field: decorative, hobby-like, feminine and childish. That fact alone was something Kristalova saw as an advantage. The choice to work with a material that was so encumbered contained an artistic freedom. It was a way of escaping conventions and notions about what “real” art should look like. Another important aspect was that the three-dimensional work with clay was very close to the two-dimensional sketching that Kristalova described as central to her creative process. Working with clay was like drawing in the air. She says: “My interest is to make three-dimensional sketches of what it’s like to exist. A fairly everyday existence, I think” (Kristalova 2012, 11:50 min.).

She describes how the ideas that come to her go through the sketching process before they are possibly further developed and given three-dimensional form. The ceramic sculptures she makes are often painted. She says that the possibility of painting them is important, because it makes the step between two-dimensional and three-dimensional sketching even smaller. She says that she finds handcrafting work with clay is easy. However, the fact that clay allows itself to be easily controlled is no guarantee that the results will be a success. The challenge lies in the artistic form of expression. She describes how the sculptures can become mute and stop speaking. For them not to become so requires honesty, precision and an intuitive sense that can determine whether everything is as it should be.
Kaninflickan (Rabbit Girl), 2009, Klara Kristalova.
Through the descriptions of her work that Kristalova gave during the discussion, it is possible to understand why she chose clay as a material. Her way of reasoning about ceramics and clay also contains to some extent an answer to the question of how I, with my lengthy ceramics experience, could still be so surprised by the power of her ceramic form of expression. It is presumably easier to perceive artistic potential in the negative burden associated with some ceramic methods and materials if you stand outside the context that has generated those methods. As part of the crafts collective, I can see that I have helped to create the burdensome ballast which the techniques are perceived to carry. It is tempting for participants in the craft field who have artistic ambition to dissociate themselves from such forms of expression. However, keeping a distance from the negative image that has glued itself to some ceramic methods and techniques is not a particularly effective strategy if you want to liberate the artistic potential contained by those methods. In contrast, it would seem that the strategy of borrowing the burdened forms of expression and transferring them to a field where that burden can be renegotiated and become a strength, instead of a burden, is a far more effective strategy. The artistic reappropriation of a clay-based languageness that could previously have been considered as exhausted has also made it easier for practitioners within the crafts field to be bolder and exploit more of the artistic potential borne by ceramics.

Partly as a consequence of the successes by artists such as Klara Kristalova, the visual arts scene's perception of the crafts-associated ceramic forms of expression as burdened has changed. The previous lack of interest has been reversed and today the visual arts scene has a curiosity and welcoming attitude towards these forms of expression. Many art workers are now using clay's linguistic potential and are moving freely between the different scenes. These practitioners include both people with a ceramic education and those without. From the Swedish scene I can mention names such as Linda Karlsson, Joakim Ojanen, Eva Hild, Veronika Browall, Per B. Sundberg, Frida Fjellman and Gustaf Nordenskiöld plus others. I can now consider myself to be in this category. However, one difference still appears to remain. As a rule, only those people with a crafts-linked educational
background appear in both the art and the crafts scenes. Despite everything, the art scene can be considered the more attractive of the two. There is therefore no reason for practitioners who already have access to it to seek out the crafts scene.

The second artist I have chosen to highlight is Sara Möller. She graduated from HDK in 2009 with a master's degree in ceramic art. Since then, she has moved between the crafts scene and the visual arts scene. I heard her give a talk about her work at HDK. It sparked my interest. I was also attracted to how she used and spoke about clay's possibilities. I perceive her works as being fairly dark. They are not deliberately pleasing. But even though they arouse in me existential thoughts about death and decay, they also carry a fragile hopefulness. It is possible to patch and mend, support and bandage. Branches, sticks and bits of cloth take position and support and hold up the clay's organic corporeality. Or vice versa. The clay's heavier and grounded forms hold up the lighter and more fragile wooden and textile structures. The perish-ability does not seem to be totally definitive. Perhaps it can to some extent be delayed and negotiated. As in Kristalova's works, the glazes sometimes run but in a different, perhaps more ceramically deliberate way than for Kristalova. Möller's works have clear roots in the history of ceramics. I perceive some surface roots in the 20th century's modernistic industrial art tradition and some thicker and deeper ones that reach back down into the prehistoric ceramic tradition. The form of the vessel constantly makes its presence felt in the hand-built shapes. Möller's works possess their strength regardless of these historical linkages. They comprise only one aspect, perhaps most perceivable to people who know the ceramic tradition well and have a well-developed ability to read it. Alongside her three-dimensional works, she also works two dimensionally. This often involves drawing and watercolour painting.

In an interview and subsequent email exchange, Möller has described her thoughts on how she regards her own practice. She says that clay seriously caught her interest at a preparatory art school (Kronoberg Art School under St Sigfrid's Folk High School). She found clay to be a kind of refuge – a way of escaping the pressure that she otherwise felt at the school. Clay was a bit nerdy and
Uplif ing, 2014, Sara Möller. Photo: Mattias Hök Nordkvist
something for younger students. For those who wanted to apply to art colleges and universities, painting was what mattered.

Based on her interest in clay that was born at the folk high school, she then applied to the Ceramic Art programme at HDK. It was not a self-evident choice and afterwards she wonders if perhaps she really should have studied fine art instead. The fact that things turned out the way they did was due a lot to chance. She says she did not have any clear preconceptions about crafts before she applied to HDK. On the contrary, she describes crafts as being a fairly unknown field up to that point.

After her training she found herself in a kind of in-between land. A place between utility-focused crafts and fine art. She feels that this place contains a certain freedom. In retrospect, however, she does see some advantages in the choice she made, even though the training did not meet her expectations in all respects. Although the training was demanding, she also found a necessary security at HDK. In her experience, competition between the students was not very strong. The clay also gave her a framework within which to work. For obvious reasons, working with clay was nothing that was questioned at HDK's Ceramics Department. The clay provided a stability which she feels may have been necessary for her.

I asked her what drives her artistically. What does she want to say with her art? She says that she bases her work on herself and she processes personal issues but in the hope that they can also apply to other people. She explains:

My work is broadly about reflecting an inner nature and what happens in the encounter between the inner world and the outer real world. You could say that I do a kind of abstract affect modelling. I don’t understand the world – or myself for that matter – and I believe that via the actual integration with the clay and in my sketching with a pen, I am trying to find answers or perhaps just carry on a conversation. My works often balance on the border between figurative and abstract, and I appreciate the freedom that exists in between them, both in terms of expression and in handcrafting with the clay. Since I was a child I have loved ceramic figurines and
originally that was also what I wanted to do in clay myself. I gradually began to move towards a more abstract form of expression, even though I still regard my works as a kind of portrait. I aspire to create a tension or sensuality in the works’ design or in the encounters between different materials, but also through how I combine my works in a larger installation. When I build an exhibition, it’s important that it contains darkness and ugliness along with something joyful and beautiful. But perhaps the most important thing of all is that I try to maintain a humorous tone – I find intense seriousness difficult. Another rule I have is to challenge myself not to repeat – for the public’s sake but perhaps mostly for my own, as I dislike repeating and want to be surprised.

(Möller 2016)

I asked her if she could say something about how she regards art:

For me, art is freedom, a refuge and an invisible room that contains and allows everything. Art can give comfort and be incredibly joyful and fun. But art can also be exclusionary, cold and capitalistic, like all the other ugly things we humans become involved with. In my creative process I want to really be true to myself and not succumb to external influence. But it’s incredibly hard! Of course, you want to exhibit your art, you want people to be affected by it and obviously to buy it so you can afford to make more. So it’s a struggle to fight for what’s most important, not to flatter but to be true. Fortunately enough, the role of artist suits me quite well. I’m not someone who seeks security, I detest feeling trapped and I like standing outside the treadmill. On the other hand, I often doubt my practice and what benefit my works offer the world. These occasions can be difficult. Then I tend to comfort myself by saying that my life choice is in itself a political act and a way of standing up for the necessity of art.

(Möller 2016)
One thing that sparked my interest during Möller’s lecture was when she said that she had deliberately tried to move away from clay’s forms of expression in favour of another artistic materiality. A scholarship stay in London became an opportunity to test her art beyond clay. She says it was surprisingly difficult, but not impossible. Among other techniques, watercolour painting opened up one pathway, alongside the other materials she had already been working with: tree branches, textiles, rope, cords and plaster. She described how she sees similarities between clay and watercolour paint: “I like it when you cannot or do not need to have total control over a material but really have to cooperate with it. Both materials respond well to immediacy and rapidity, which contributes to a naive style that I like” (Möller 2016).

Möller says that she gained important artistic experience from the attempt. At the same time, it became clear what an important role clay has in her practice. I asked her about that role:

It is, after all, the material that I can most easily communicate with. I haven’t found any other material that feels so easy for me. [...] all the others are much more of a thought. Clay can always be reshaped, which means I can sketch out the sculpture’s form while I’m building it, and then I can reach conclusions that I would never have been able to conceive of if I’d first sketched the form on a sheet of paper. As a material, watercolour, for example, demands a totally different kind of concentration before I put my brush to the paper. I have to prepare myself and have a plan for the first brushstroke, because in a way, it’s about unleashing the paint and finding a conversation. I get much more tired from painting than from working with clay. (Möller 2016)

Möller describes how, while working with clay, it can happen that: “my head can be somewhere else but my hands are working together with the clay [...] My language emerges from it” (Möller 2015, 39:57 min.). This involves working with the clay and its plasticity. She is more ambivalent about firing processes, especially glazes and glazing, describing them as “The unenjoyable
bit” (Möller 2015, 27:37 min.). It is poisonous and unpleasant. She believes that the ability to be systematic is a prerequisite for success. Being spontaneous, as she describes herself, often has catastrophic consequences. She says she often thinks that she should stop working with glazes and glazing, and find another method of adding patina and surface treatment. At the same time, something holds her back: “But sometimes when you open the kiln there is a masterpiece, which you could not have figured out!” (Möller 2015, 44:08 min.).

I asked how she regards the strong link to handcrafting and the handcrafting tradition that crafts involves. She describes the tendency to generalise based on the widely held preconceptions about crafts, and gives the example: “As soon as I say what I work with, people say: ‘Oh, so you make pots?’ No, I don’t make pots!” (Möller 2015 45:25 min.) She finds it wearying to have to explain herself and her practice based on the stereotypes people project onto her. But this is actually a minor issue. She believes that the history of crafts is important, perhaps especially the really old history of ceramics and its artifacts. The type of ceramics that in various ways fulfilled humans’ basic needs. I asked if she feels any affinity with this type of ceramics and the people who made it. She replies:

Yes, very much so. And when I began looking at that kind of work, I recognised in it things that I’ve made myself, and that pleased me. And then I began looking at it more, and sometimes I’ve brought it into my work even more. For example, really old Mexican and Asian works of applied art and how they have portrayed people and animals. But I’m not as interested in the crafts of today. I don’t feel a connection to them in the same way. They’re so much about products. On the other hand, I feel a very strong affinity with many practitioners in today’s applied arts and fine arts, where a huge number of people suddenly seem to want to work with clay. It’s actually really great, and it feels as if unnecessary barriers are starting to be loosened up. (Möller 2016)
My decision to single out Sara Möller and Klara Kristalova is, of course, no coincidence. Above all, I chose them because their works speak to me. I also feel a kinship with them. We have three different situations and backgrounds, and from the point of view of our practices, the links between us may not always be obvious. However, in my view, we have something in common in how we relate to clay as a linguistic possibility. The work with clay and its plasticity plays a central role, and both Möller’s and Kristalova’s art focuses on existential issues. On what it says to be human. I share these interests. Based on them, an art is often created that evades verbal languageness. We all also appear to have experienced difficulties when we have been challenged to explain and account for what we really intend with what we are doing. It seems to be difficult, perhaps even impossible, to declare the content of some art with the help of words.

Based on the descriptions of these three practices, it is clear that clay’s physical property is central in this context. The material has its possibilities and its limitations. Its plasticity makes clay an immediate and quick material. Clay can be perceived as obedient but it also has its own will. It can answer back and sometimes assert something other, and more interesting, than what we personally had intended to express. If we are open to it, clay can sometimes lead our work in a direction that could not have been predicted (see Strandqvist 2010).

The historical and cultural charge carried by all linguistic materialities is also important. In the linguistic materiality that is everyday speech, this charge is often used intuitively. A “feeling for language” is a suitable term to describe such an intuitive awareness. In the more contemplative languageness represented by art, this charge is sometimes used in a more deliberately considered way.

Kristalova described how she became interested in clay due to its low artistic status. However, that interest was not about explicitly pointing to, or commenting on, the fact that it was a low status material from an artistic perspective. Instead, she uses the negative charge of the material in a more implicit way so that she can express what she wants to say. For Möller, the very long handcrafting history of ceramics is important. I also experience these historical roots to be important in my practice. But, in my view, neither Möller, Kristalova

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or I are interested in using clay’s historical and cultural charge as primary artistic content. Such an interest can be described as being more analytical and conceptual. And, with such an interest, the cultural and historical charge of materials can become the primary artistic material. As usual, for most practitioners, this is not an either/or situation but rather somewhat of a both/and. I would say that for Kristalova, Möller and me, the interest leans in the intuitive direction. Practitioners who lean in the other, conceptual direction, include such names as Caroline Slotte, Kristine Tilge Lund, Paul Scott, Zandra Ahl and Kjell Rylander. In these cases, the artistic possibilities of clay with its plasticity do not necessarily need to be the central focus. Rather, it is about highlighting and artistically converting the material on the basis of its historical and social context and charge.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have given an account of how I entered into the role of ceramist, artist and craft person. I have also tried to give a picture of how I perceive the artistic practice with which I am engaged. With the aim of giving such a picture, I have presented some snapshots of my own practice and described in more detail some of my artistic work processes. I have also placed how I regard clay’s languageness – that is, the poetics of clay – alongside how two fellow artists regard it. This dissertation’s clay-based End Note opens up additional perspectives on how I use clay’s linguistic possibility.

In my descriptions and reflections, there was room to include some things but not others. Even though the picture is not, and can never be, complete, I still hope it is possible to more or less understand how I personally understand and relate to art and to the artistic creative process. I also hope that this chapter makes it clear that I regard my perceptions and my way of working as changeable. The main purpose of this chapter is to give the reader a foundation that helps them to understand my driving forces and my perspective. I wanted to make visible my own position and my own understanding of my practice. I hope that this will make it easier both to understand and to critically assess the research presented here.
Chapter 3
The practice of craft
THROWING

This chapter comprises a study and in-depth exploration of craft and craft’s phenomenology. I am allowing the text to revolve around throwing, which I consider to be a good starting point for several reasons. In addition to the fact that it is the individual craft discipline that I am best suited to say something about – I have spent many years learning the craft and many years practising it – there are a number of other reasons. The craft is very old and is a vibrant and important part of the culture of human artefacts. It is a craft in which the craft person has a very close relationship to their material and it is a very clever way of benefitting from clay’s properties and humans’ dexterity. Other than the potter’s wheel, no additional tools than a pair of hands are really needed to do this craft. The technique is – or perhaps above all has been – a highly efficient way of making ceramic utility objects. If we apply the following definition of what a machine is: “any system formed and connected to alter, transmit, and direct applied forces to accomplish a specific objective” (Risatti 2007, p. 67), then throwing can be regarded as one of the earliest documented examples of mechanical manufacture. It is an early stage on the way to the ever more mechanised and industrialised production that we have today.

Another interesting aspect in this context is that anyone who wants to learn to throw must get themselves over a threshold in order to be able to view themselves as a competent thrower at all. This means that the knowledge itself is easy to detect. Just as with cycling or swimming, there is a critical point that must be passed in order for the knowledge that a person is trying to acquire to be visible at all. After this critical point has been passed, the practitioner is still probably an unsure swimmer, cyclist or thrower, but can still claim to be able to do the technique. In this way, throwing differs from many other types of craft, such as modelling, where the learning occurs more gradually and the boundary between being able and not able to do it is more fluid.

12 The technique is considered to have emerged in Mesopotamia and be about 5,000 years old. (Carlsson 2016) – from Nationalencyklopedin.
Throwing involves understanding how to master and benefit from the situation involving rotating clay. Before the clay is put into rotation, however, we must learn how to prepare clay so that it is fit for throwing. The clay must be kneaded or processed in another way so that it becomes plastic, homogenous and free from scrap and air bubbles. An understanding is required of how a lump (a lump of clay intended for throwing) is affixed onto the wheel head and then centred. It is the ability to centre which is the critical knowledge that must be acquired before attempts at throwing can be described as throwing. If you cannot centre, you are not throwing, any more than you can be described as swimming if you cannot keep your head above the water’s surface. The practice involves a kind of sense of rhythm. For beginners who are trying to learn to throw, centring absorbs their whole attention. Only when it has been mastered, when you have achieved the right rhythm, can other aspects of throwing be seriously included in the learning process.

As bodily knowledge becomes integrated, the thrower’s attention while doing the work shifts and their knowledge can deepen. The more advanced thrower has had the opportunity to shift their focus and gain a broader understanding of the possibilities and limitations encompassed by throwing. Knowledge that is to be integrated in the body must become ingrained. The hand positions and patterns of movement must be performed again and again. These repetitions must not be viewed as a totally static process. Each repetition enables the practitioner to make tiny, fine adjustments of their patterns of action based on some small insight won from the previous attempt. It is sometimes claimed that ten thousand hours of practise is necessary to become skilled at a craft (Sennet 2008, p. 20). This is to trivialise the whole situation slightly but it is correct that acquiring skills is time consuming. Of course, the time and energy that must be devoted to learning a craft also make the craft person more acutely aware that the knowledge is losing its relevance. This is true whatever the craft knowledge involved.

During my first summer at Gustavsbergs Porslinsfabrik, I only threw three forms. I repeated each form hundreds of times.
I thereby gradually gained the body-integrated knowledge required in order to be able to understand the tradition in which Sven Wejsfelt operated. Acquiring that knowledge demanded stubbornness and time. My stubbornness was based on a conviction that the knowledge was relevant and that Sven possessed the knowledge and could guide me into it (see Polanyi 2013, pp. 88–89; Molander 1996, p.132).

As always when an individual acquires knowledge, there is a sense of satisfaction in the learning process itself. Learning is fun. The repetitive process of making the knowledge ingrained can seem boring but it was (and still is) fun to develop one's knowledge as a thrower. The learning process has not ended and every opportunity to practise the craft is an opportunity to hone one's ability. The opposite – not to throw – is to lose one's edge and proficiency.

Throwing is a profoundly sensual experience which requires great bodily presence. Depending on the task, great mental presence is also sometimes necessary. Throwing often feels satisfying but sometimes it is of course also monotonous, exhausting and boring. However, I have been privileged to work under conditions that have often enabled me to experience the intrinsic meaning of the craft. It is possible to rest in that meaning. It is a meaning which is not directly linked to the strict benefit of throwing as a means...
of creating forms and vessels in clay. But if for any reason I am forced to perform my craft in a less skilled way than I am capable of – if I have to take shortcuts – then some of this meaning is lost. This touches upon another aspect of practising craft. If this is to be experienced as meaningful in and of itself, then the craft person’s skill must be taken seriously and given leeway. This is, of course, also the definition that is usually used to distinguish between mechanised work and craft work. In the type of mechanised work that followed in the wake of industrialisation, as the division of labour and the mechanisation process increased, the craft person lost their own influence over the work process. “In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first” (Taylor 1967, p.7). This classic statement by Frederick Winslow Taylor, the man who gave his name to Taylorism, well captures the shift in perspective which industrialisation and the rational scientific way of regarding the production process brought with them. The irreplaceable craft person became a replaceable worker. Each worker’s task became reduced to a few steps in which the skill of the individual worker was of subordinate importance and the individual worker lost the overview and influence of what was being produced, which the craft person had previously possessed.

In this context it can be appropriate to point out that the division of labour and rationalisation were not unknown phenomena prior to industrialisation, even though they developed much faster as it emerged. As the example of the potter’s wheel shows, a desire to rationalise and facilitate the production process has been a human driving force for a long time. Descriptions of how work could be organised in a master craftsman’s workshop, before the guild system was over run by industrialisation, show that specialised workers already existed there. That is, workers who only performed a limited task (which could be highly skilled). There were also workers who performed simpler tasks and could therefore easily be replaced. (Tempete 1997, p. 18).

“Skill can thus be related to the leeway to act, which leads to the concept of skill leeway.”(Sjömar 2013, p. 6). This quotation is taken from a context in which craft skill is discussed. Craft skill reveals itself in action. It is personal and thereby time- and
place-bound. The existence of the knowledge is dependent on the existence of a leeway for it to act in the time and at the place where it is practised. If this leeway to act disappears, so too does the leeway for the knowledge. The leeway is dependent on the status of the knowledge and its function at the place and time it is practised. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, the skill leeway allowed for throwing has shrunk.

Of course, there is a sliding scale of the extent to which a machine-based production process requires workers with craft skills or not. Earlier I wrote that the potter’s wheel can be regarded as one of humankind’s first machines. The mechanisation of the production process required a new skill from the potter and thus shrunk the skill leeway for other, previous forming techniques. Over time, the pottery-making trade came to be strongly associated with the ability to throw. However, as a machine, the potter’s wheel is still very dependent on being operated by a skilled craft person. It is still the craft person who is in control and the machine that is being controlled. The thrower controls the process from the time when the clump is affixed to the wheel head until the vessel in its final thrown form is lifted off, and can continuously control and influence the result throughout the entire process. At Gustavsberg I did not personally decide what was to be produced. In that sense, no leeway to act was given. The production was predetermined. However, as a thrower under those conditions, I was still the one who continuously had to assess and be responsible for the quality requirements placed on the production. It was my proficiency and my decisions that determined the result. Even in this strictly controlled situation, it was still possible to experience throwing as stimulating, meaningful and to some extent even free.

One of my instructors at Konstfack, Erik Hennix, who had worked as a thrower at Gustavsberg, told us that he had no difficulty telling the difference between his Friberg vases and Berndt Friberg’s Friberg vases and other throwers’ Friberg vases. Berndt Friberg was not the only person who threw Friberg vases at Gustavsberg. It would be difficult for anyone other than the throwers involved in that specific production process to make this distinction. But what this story tells
us above all is that there was leeway – albeit very small – for throwers working in Gustavsberg’s industrial production to express their personal style.

Throwing is an activity that makes it possible for the thrower to put themselves in a special kind of mental state. It is particularly true if the work is routine. The prerequisite is that the bodily motor aspect of the activity is so well integrated and automatic that it leaves some of the intellectual capacity free. It is then possible to think about other things while throwing. This does not necessarily have to impact the quality of the work. On the contrary, in some cases the quality of the work can actually become better if you are not thinking about what you are doing.

The interior designer Andreas Nobel has considered this phenomenon. He gives an example from the world of sports, quoting the ice hockey player Johan Fransson: “It looks as if sometimes we’re thinking. A thinking hockey player is never good” (Nobel 2014, p. 173). In practising a physical skill, analysing what you are doing at that moment can be counterproductive and disrupt the process rather than support it. For a state of flow to be able to arise, the skill must be able to manifest itself without conscious mental effort. This is also why physical exertion such as throwing clay in a series production situation has leeway for a meditative dimension. You are where you are and you’re doing what you’re doing, and you do not need to think about what you will do next because it all happens automatically. When I throw clay in a series production situation, it not infrequently happens that during the work I cannot remember what it is that I am throwing. Vase or bowl or what? My immersion has become so deep that I really do not know what my body is doing. Like many other repetitive physical occupations, throwing can be a way of liberating one’s thinking.

The following statement by the American sociologist Richard Sennett points in the opposite direction: “At its higher reaches, technique is no longer a mechanical activity: people can feel fully and think deeply what they are doing once they do it well” (Sennett 2009, p. 20). Based on my reasoning above, this sounds like a contradiction. I have just stated that a prerequisite for
being able to think about something other than what you are doing is that the skill has become so ingrained that it can be done automatically or mechanically. In this respect, mechanical skill is deep skill. But to perceive a contradiction would be to misinterpret what Sennet is trying to say here. When he claims that practicing a craft at its highest level is not mechanical, he is referring to the extent to which the craft person is mentally involved in the process or not. The ability to be absent and mechanical in one’s work also means that one has the ability to have a special kind of presence in the work. When we approach the limit of the possible, the mental absence enabled by the mechanical aspect of the work can be turned around and become a heightened presence relative to what is being done. When the body has the ability to perform hand positions without the craft person needing to think about it, it creates an expanded possibility of having a sharpened and anticipatory attention to the task at hand. “You discover what you are doing while you are doing it. And the more experienced and skilled a practitioner is, the more they can sharpen their attention, because they learn to see better, and the freer that attention can roam – because more and more becomes routine”, in the words of philosopher Bengt Molander (Molander 1996, p. 143). Presence or absence? It all depends on what the situation demands of the craft person. The common prerequisite is that craft skill is ingrained in the body.

Earlier I described how I experience throwing as being meaningful in and of itself. There are many reasons for this, including the meditative dimension I have just described. Something else I believe is significant to the meaning a craft can convey involves the logic on which that craft is based. Rowing has an aspect that is not dependent on external ideas about it – on how we read cultural and social significance into it etc. It is a “pure” craft skill. It involves the physical conditions that make the craft itself possible – the body and the material and the interaction between them. With regard to throwing, it is the practical knowledge of the hand positions, the patterns of action, and the properties of the clay under rotation that define this aspect of the craft. We can swim in various ways but fundamentally all swimming is based on the
same principle. The same applies to throwing. The basic principle is not negotiable for either swimming or throwing. The special and compelling circumstances also mean that throwing engages the thrower bodily and mentally in a specific way. Throwing steers how the thrower’s attention is directed and how the physical responses are given. If we apply a Platonic perspective to the whole situation, these fundamental conditions can be described as the craft’s concept. It is then the non-discursive aspect of the craft that is involved (cf. Adamson 2013 p. 100).

This does not mean that throwing can be regarded as an eternal phenomenon in the world. Throwing can disappear as a human activity. Technological development means that some crafts are being displaced and new ones are emerging. The potter’s wheel is one such example. Crafts disappear all the time and crafts with a far longer history than throwing have disappeared. The craft of making stone axes can no longer be regarded as alive, even though in its final stage it was based on a tradition that was over two million years old. Its skill leeway has basically ceased to exist. Of course, the tradition of making stone axes still influences us today – it is even reasonable to regard that particular tradition as being very significant in human history – but no longer as a living craft.

CODE EXPERTISE

Craft people, alive or dead, communicate with each other via their craft. As craft people, we should consciously relate to this communicative aspect if we want to be taken seriously by our colleagues. Craft people must understand the inner logic of their respective crafts. This is the fundamental prerequisite for being able to practise a craft at all and make stone axes or pots. To the stone axe maker, all stone axes reveal themselves and become possible to interpret based on that craft’s logic. Every competent craft person in every craft field has the ability to have a particular kind of awareness of the phenomena belonging to that field (see

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14 The oldest found stone objects made by humans are about 2.5 million years old. (Larsson 2014) The stonemason’s craft is thereby far older than modern humans.
Molander 2003, p. 13). “A skilled smith has a special ‘code expertise’ which enables him or her to make a different interpretation of a forged historical object than what an archaeologist or art historian, for example, can do” (Almevik 2003, p. 45). This statement by Gunnar Almevik, professor at the Department of Conservation at the University of Gothenburg, supports the assertion that the craft person has a special interpretive ability but also highlights the fact that the craft person is not alone in their ability to interpret the result of the craft involved. Objects can be interpreted in various ways. The archaeologist is the person best suited to make an archaeological interpretation; the art historian an art historical one, and the craft person a craft interpretation of the same artefact. This phenomenon could be described as the difference between being a spectator, judge or player with regard to football. Everyone understands and experiences the game but in different ways. Their understanding serves different purposes.

The possibility of interpreting objects from various perspectives is also something in which the late British writer and art critic Peter Dormer is interested. He writes that it is fully possible to acquire a capacity to judge within a craft tradition of which one is not personally a practitioner. To use his term, the knowledge he is speaking of is that of the connoisseur. The connoisseur becomes one primarily through their experiences and contact with the results of the craft. Acquiring an in-depth ability to judge and interpret requires the connoisseur’s immersive involvement. Acquiring a connoisseurship requires a considered user- and participant experience of the field to which the knowledge applies. Through their experiences, the connoisseur hones their feeling for quality. Even the artistic dimension becomes accessible and assessable via participation and use. The connoisseur’s knowledge is, as Dormer writes, fundamentally experience- and example-based knowledge (Dormer 2010, pp. 225–226).

Dormer describes an asymmetry in how we regard various forms of knowledge. He argues that in a situation where the knowledge that allows itself to be expressed and explained in words and text is privileged, it is easy to disregard the type of knowledge that does not allow itself to be captured in words (Dormer 2010, p. 229).
He considers this to be a major problem with regard to the practical knowledge that is part of a craft person’s professional expertise. He feels that this issue is particularly troublesome for practitioners within a traditional and utility-oriented craft. Because these practitioners can have difficulties in verbally explaining the artistic content of their respective craft practices, they risk being regarded as naïve, ignorant and unthinking. They do not understand what they are doing because they cannot describe it in words. The philosopher Bengt Molander discusses this problem in terms of knowledge destruction. He illustrates his point by describing the destructiveness that results from the authoritarian and aristocratic characteristics which can already be found in Plato (in the Dialogues of Socrates) due to the demand that to be considered valid, knowledge must be able to be formulated and made conceptual (Molander 1996, pp. 101–102). When Dormer highlights the problem, he bases his argument on one of the more influential philosophers of the 20th century, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Fundamentally, the asymmetry involves how we regard knowledge, that is, that only a certain kind of knowledge allows itself to be conceptualised. Wittgenstein was interested in how and when language can be used to convey meaningful messages between people. In his own reasoning, Dormer is content to note that Wittgenstein believed that some things evade theories and language but can still be understood and become visible and demonstrated by example.

I believe that Wittgenstein’s ideas about language are interesting in this context. It can be worth developing some of them here. As has been said, he draws attention to the fact that some of what cannot be expressed directly can still become apprehended via examples and comparisons. In the following example (Wittgenstein 2009, § 1) the focus is on the written language in the form of a slip of paper. On the slip it says: “five red apples”. The slip is given to a shopkeeper, who looks at the paper and puts five red apples on the counter. Of course, five means five, red red, and apples apples, so we might think that this is not odd. But Wittgenstein regards this type of language comprehension as naïve. (Wittgenstein 2009, § 2) The word “red” in itself says nothing about the colour red. In this example, the shopkeeper uses colour samples so that he can identify
the colour red, and the way he makes use of the word “five” by putting five apples on the counter really says nothing straightforward about the significance of the word “five”. It only says something about how the word is being used in this situation. The language and its meaning are situational and the concepts and the words’ meaning shift depending on the situation. Because the language and its use are situational, the path to linguistic comprehension is based on example. Someone must make us aware of how the word “red” should be understood. By studying examples, for instance by experiencing how other people use the word, we can gradually gain an understanding of how the word “red” is used. The word then becomes comprehensible and concrete. It has gained a conceptual content and simultaneously become useable. A connoisseur’s (or user’s) path to knowledge about the phenomenon which that knowledge is about must be assumed to be more multi-faceted and complex than the path to understanding the single word “red”. However, this simple example of the slip of paper illustrates that knowledge and understanding which are jointly managed are also jointly transmitted, or traded, in a socialisation process.

HONEST CRAFTSMANSHIP

According to Dormer, the form of interpretation that a craft person is capable of through their knowledge can be placed within a dimension of craft ethics. He writes about the craft person striving to do good work and how that can be regarded as a path to greater self-knowledge. He argues that through this, a moral aspect in the Aristotelian sense of ethical virtue can be linked to practising a craft. The craft person has a duty to strive to do good craftsmanship. Dormer says that skilled craft people sometimes talk about the crafted objects they encounter in terms of them being “honest” or not (Dormer 2010, p. 222). The following quotation conveys a concentrated version of such a craft ethic: “All care and sense of responsibility and honesty shall be included in the piece of furniture so that others can perceive it.” The statement is by the furniture craftsman Thomas Tempte (Tempte 1997, p. 83).
If the word “furniture” is replaced by the word “pot”, this craft ethic could equally well apply to the potter.

So how does one throw pottery honestly or how can a thrown object be labelled as dishonest? As has already been said, there do exist some given rules, often implied or not expressed, for the craft person to relate to. They are comprised of a mixture of rules and standpoints which are physically compulsory, collegially linked to the craft, and of a more personal nature. In my role as a thrower, I regard the physical rules as universal and indisputable. They are the same rules that I previously called invariable or nondiscursive. Examples of such compulsory rules are that the clay must be centred and that the wheel must rotate in order for it to be at all possible to describe something as throwing. These rules are so self-evident to the craft person that they can hardly be called rules. They are compulsory. However, many aspects of a craft can be debated based on a genuine interest in the craft in question. I will continue to talk about throwing and examine some of these rules more closely.

Each thrown vessel possesses a balance that can be more or less optimal in relation to the vessel’s function. Based on the function and desired properties, the clay should be allocated in a specific way within the vessel. The rim should have a certain thickness that is in proportion to the thickness of the base and walls. This applies particularly to utility objects because the utility function implicitly governs what this division should be, based on the function desired. Sometimes it is necessary to prioritise one particular functional property to the disadvantage of another. A thin rim on a mug can be more pleasant to drink from but it thereby also becomes weaker than a mug with a thicker rim. Such a choice is of course open to discussion. Another criterion, which is not directly related to the vessel’s utility function, is how an object's firing and drying properties are influenced by the clay's allocation. An object with large differences in the thickness of its body will crack more easily during these processes. If these differences are not required by the object’s function, they should be avoided as much as possible. In this respect, a thrower can judge whether the crafted object is honest or not, and a thrower should strive for that honesty. Otherwise one is cheating and is not at all an honest craft person. My perception is that there is
great unanimity among throwers with regard to this type of virtue. Even there are other aspects where opinions can clearly differ. These are the cultural and locally determined aspects of the craft in question. They involve issues of likes and taste: the aesthetics of the craft.

I can examine my own development as a thrower in this light. As a trainee thrower, I gradually became aware of how forms could be experienced as more or less vigorous. Vigorousness became something to strive after. Limpness something to avoid. There is a special way of regarding and discussing this characteristic among the professionals I encountered. I also noticed that there were limits to which forms were at all possible for me to achieve on the wheel. I also discovered that it was possible to stretch those limits, but at some point even the most skilled of throwers could go no further. There were possibilities and there were limitations. It also seemed that the forms I perceived as vigorous were in some way defined by the potential inherent in the clay and the throwing process. For the clay to hold its shape during the actual throwing, it is easier if the lines of a vessel do not have too many kinks or abrupt transitions. It is always tricky to throw large horizontal planes due to the clay's limited ability to hold its shape in this context. Continuous upward lines and soft curves characterise the forms that are easy to throw fluidly. This fact influenced how I interpreted thrown objects and influenced my understanding of the craft. Fat and lean clay, the ability to hold a shape, limp and vigorous forms, became important and comprehensible concepts based on my fellow throwers' discussions about throwing and my own throwing. I was drawn to objects that could, in my assessment, willingly allow themselves to be thrown fluidly. I defined such objects as vigorous. This is the reason why I became
aware early on of a thrower such as Berndt Friberg. His forms were characterised by exactly these upward lines and soft curves. They were vigorous.

Sven Wejsfelt worked in the same tradition as Berndt Friberg. It was an industrial art tradition in a modernist spirit and it influenced their throwing. Both men strove, in addition to achieving vigorousness, to not leave any visible trace of the hand and the throwing process in their objects. Their goal was a smooth surface and “clean” lines which could showcase the glazes that were characteristic of the industrial art tradition in which they worked. To achieve this, they used flexible metal ribs both when throwing and when trimming. As a summer employee, this surprised me a bit. At that time I felt that this could be called cheating. The aesthetic that had been developed by designers and throwers at Gustavsberg differed considerably from the throwing styles I had encountered earlier. In those, in contrast, the goal was to strive to leave hand marks visible. This is an example of the types of locally and stylistically coloured perceptions that arise within local craft collectives. The aesthetic is not the only thing to be visible in the different local styles. There are also variations in how the craft is performed technically, even though it is always based on the same fundamental principles. For example, a thrower who throws with a high rotation speed will produce a different result than the one who throws more slowly. Of course, the aesthetic is also influenced by the technique and vice versa.

Finally, there is also the purely personal standpoint. The lee-way for this increases the more the throwing involves expressing oneself artistically as an individual. The Western contemporary art tradition places a premium on forms of expression that are perceived to be innovative and boundary breaking. Not infrequently, and perhaps paradoxically, for a craft person this involves breaking the rules and norms that are laid down by the type of craft rules described above. For a craft person, being a virtuous follower of the contemporary Western art tradition can involve having to be unvirtuous as a craft person.
Vase by Bernt Friberg, 1974 (height: 21cm). Photo: Bertil Wreting (Nationalmuseum)
WORKMANSHIP

Within the crafts field, ideas about workmanship have played a major role. This is not so strange given the field’s strong link to various handcrafting traditions. In a handcrafting tradition, the definition of good workmanship is in some respects clear cut. There is right and there is wrong. However, as I have already pointed out, when crafts also involve artistic expression, tensions arise between ideas about virtuously and skilfully made craft objects and the desire to achieve a valid contemporary artistic expression. It is clearly impossible to equate good workmanship defined from a craft person’s perspective with interesting art defined from a contemporary concept of art. In the crafts field this contradiction is constantly making itself felt. The perception of and ideas about the significance of workmanship within crafts is charged. There are opinions that good workmanship gets in the way of artistic freedom and expression. On the other hand, it is clear that unskilled workmanship also gets in the way of artistic freedom and expression.

The late David Pye, who can be described as a craft person, considered this issue of workmanship. His material was wood and he also worked for a time as a professor of furniture design at the Royal College of Art in London. He has become topical again because his ideas about workmanship have been discussed in contemporary crafts theory, especially in contexts that discuss workmanship (see Adamson 2007, pp.70-76).

So what did Pye have to say on this topic? In my view, he avoids the issue of skilled workmanship because he does not consider it to be really relevant in this context. As a representative of the crafts field, he belongs to those people who realised early on that it is not workmanship in itself that matters. In an artistic context, what matters is how an object communicates artistically. Even with limited workmanship, a craft person can still create valid artistic statements. Fine crafts differ from handicrafts on this point. In fine crafts, the artistic element can be placed above the function (when one exists). Based on this insight, Pye focuses on what can be communicated via the
production procedures and the craft, and not on the issue of the extent to which something is skilfully done or not. He establishes the two concepts of “workmanship of risk” and “workmanship of certainty” (Pye 1995, pp. 20-24).

Workmanship of risk is a way to define a type of craft in which during the work process the craft person more or less continually risks the result of the work. Workmanship of risk opens the door to an artistic approach. The process is dialogical, and for the alert artistic craft person, mistakes and failures can sometimes be turned into their opposite. This contrasts with the workmanship of certainty, where the result of the work are already predetermined and guaranteed before the work begins. Pye gives as examples of these two types of work handwriting and printed writing. If we apply this rationale to potato printing, for example, then cutting a letter out of a potato is the workmanship of risk. To then use it to print with is the workmanship of certainty. The result is predetermined. It should be added that Pye’s concept should not be understood as binary. As a rule, most craft and forming techniques involve some kind of risk.

Associating the workmanship of risk with artistic possibility, as is done here, does not prevent the result of workmanship of certainty from also being exploited artistically. However, with the workmanship of certainty, the chance of unexpected events occurring that influence the original concept during the production process is very small. From this perspective, the workmanship of certainty is a dead process. Despite this, it is possible to think that the result can be art even if the entire execution of an artwork can be defined as the workmanship of certainty.

When art is created there is always a risk, and this is not eliminated by the fact that the production stage can be described as being the workmanship of certainty. Art’s risk taking does not only involve the method used to materialise it. As has been said previously, the risk is linked to the opportunities for a personal form of expression, and, in order for something to be defined as art, it

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15 Workmanship of risk is actually in agreement with the initial definition I gave of crafts. That is, that “craft is work whose result depends on the practitioner’s personal judgement and skill.”
must possess a personal form of expression.\footnote{Ever since the Romantic era, the concept that a personally coloured form of expression is a fundamental prerequisite for art has dominated. In contemporary art, this concept has not infrequently been challenged and criticised. However, so far this criticism has not changed this fundamental perception within art. An identifiable sender (or the depiction of one) still seems to be a prerequisite for the art world to classify something as art. Without such an identifiable, that is, personal, sender (who can, of course, remain anonymous, as Banksy does, but in practice this changes nothing), basically no contemporary forms of expression are elevated to the level of art.}{A risk is thereby always linked to the process that creates the form of expression. If the risk is not in the execution stage, then it still remains in the concept stage. (see page 89). Here it should be pointed out that the binary division between concept and performance which I am thereby making is fairly tricky. It may be applicable in an extreme case but usually the artistic creative process at least partly follows the principle of the workmanship of risk with regard to the production process as well.

In Pye's view, the extent to which the production of a work has followed the workmanship of risk or the workmanship of certainty says nothing about the qualities of the end result. “The workmanship of risk has no exclusive prerogative of quality. What it has exclusively is an immensely various range of qualities, without which at its command the art of design becomes arid and impoverished” (Pye 1995, p. 21). The quality of the form of expression is determined by how well it fulfils the artistic purpose.

In this chapter I have tried to shed light on craft and above all on throwing from various perspectives. I have thereby increasingly considered craft's significance to the possibilities of creating artistic forms of expression. I am thus approaching the area where craft can be understood as a means of communicating artistically, which is the theme of the next chapter.
Chapter 4

On craft, languageness and language similarity
And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.
(Wittgenstein 2009, §19)

EXPRESSION OF ONESELF THROUGH CRAFT

It is possible for humans to express themselves through craft. This is particularly evident in art. The role of craft is in a complicated relationship to the expression it manifests, and it is possible to think about what it is that causes an expression manifest by a craft process to sometimes be perceived as art and sometimes not. As a young trainee potter, I strove to perform the tasks given to me by the potter in the best way possible. I wanted to make good mugs, pots and bowls. On this point I did not differ from the plumber who wants to install a pipe in the best way possible or any other handyman who tries to do a good job. What, then, makes it possible to include the potter’s handiwork in an artistic context and not the plumber’s?

Historically, membership in a craft guild was decisive in determining the extent to which the result of someone’s handiwork should be regarded as an artistic form of expression or not. The sculptor, goldsmith, ceramist and musician could all potentially have had the results of their handiwork classified as art. That is, as I have said, more difficult for the plumber. This is completely reasonable. There is a difference between what someone can achieve via, and what can be communicated with the aid of, the various forms of craft. The musician, for example, must have their full concentration on the product’s – the music’s – aesthetic aspect. For the musician, it is all about how the music is expressed. For the plumber, things are different. The primary consideration is to get the heating, water and sewage systems to work. The aesthetic aspect is not unimportant but is secondary in the context. Greater artistic demands are placed on, and greater artistic scope is given to, the musician than the plumber. The greater the artistic scope given by a craft, the more probable it is that the results will be defined as art.

It is, of course, possible to object to this statement by, for example, referring to the 20th-century composer John Cage’s work 4′33″ which, as far as the pianist is concerned, is all about how the music is not expressed. I will explore the contemporary view of the role of craft in art in Chapter 5.
Some crafts exist in a borderland between the crafts that have a purely practical goal and those with a purely artistic one. Pottery are one example of this. It is not as self-evident to the potter as it is to the musician to perceive themselves as an artist, but it is not impossible. Despite everything, many people regard ceramics as an artistic occupation, but if a plumber were to claim to be an artist by practising their craft, most people would raise their eyebrows in surprise.

What is interesting in this context is the elasticity associated with the practice of craft and the perceptions of the forms of expression produced by craft. It is noteworthy that even plumbing has a communicative aspect beyond the functional one. It may not always be very obvious but the initiated observer can infer a lot more than function from how pipes are laid. Accordingly, the art of plumbing also possesses an aesthetic. Craft’s ability to communicate something over and above the purely practical and functional appears to be a general quality and not only restricted to the artistic practices.

Following this reasoning, it is possible to place all crafts along a scale. The musician exists far out on the artistic side. The plumber exists far out on the functional side. The ceramist is found somewhere in-between. This in-between position has historically been one way to define craft. It is a combination of function and aesthetic. In saying this, I do not want to claim that all ceramists are by definition less artistic than all musicians (nor, necessarily, more artistic than all plumbers). Music with a dubious artistic value exists, as do pots with a high artistic value. One difference, however, is that a ceramist’s ugly pots can still be useful due to their function even though they are ugly. Perhaps that is why it is more difficult to tolerate ugly music?

To do as I have just done, and place crafts along a scale, whose end points are function and aesthetic, is not unproblematic. Because what is really meant by function? Although it may appear that music has no practical function and can be regarded as a purely aesthetic activity, this way of looking at it is skewed. Aesthetic is not the opposite of function. All crafts must originally have fulfilled some human need. Artistically focused crafts should
therefore in all fairness also be included with the other forms of needs-fulfilling handiwork even if the need which art fulfills is special and differs from many of the other basic human needs. In my view, the difference is that the aesthetic or the artistic impetus is about a need to express something which cannot be expressed in any other way. An individual's need to express themselves must be understood as a social need. It is a need that can be regarded as just as vitally important as the more physiological needs (such as food, heat and shelter from various physical threats), even though the crafts that meet material physiological needs are those that are normally labelled as functional.

MATERIAL CULTURE

Humans create material culture. This material culture has developed over time. One obvious example of this is our ability to use writing and to physically record linguistic messages. These text artefacts enable our personal statements to potentially outlive ourselves. We can send messages into the future and we can receive messages from our predecessors. If our hands did not have fine motor skills, this would not have been possible. Thanks to that manual dexterity we have been creating material culture for a very long time—longer, in fact, than we have been modern humans. The objects we have made were presumably originally used mainly to assist our survival and facilitate our daily life. However, it is not particularly farfetched to imagine that as we began to carry with us our self-crafted artefacts, we also began to make social use of them in addition to their purely practical use (see Paulsson & Paulsson 1956, pp. 68–84).

The philosopher Mats Rosengren discusses art and its meaning as follows: “Art as a symbolic form produces doxa—or, as I have for some time preferred to say, social meaning” (Rosengren 2015, p. 33). Social meaning is an apt description—one that clearly places art within a linguistic domain. Language, in all its forms, is constituted by its ability to create social meaning. Owing to the fact that they create social meaning, even human-created objects can
be understood from a linguistic context. We can express ourselves with their help and through them. And, just like text, our other objects can potentially survive us but still continue to create social meaning for subsequent generations (see Arendt 1958, p.137).

It is reasonable to believe that our way of giving form to the material world around us has gained an ever more complex social meaning over time. Religious, magical, social and aesthetic (language)-worlds have to a great extent been established via our culture of objects. And that is what has happened. Thanks to our manual dexterity we became craft people. Our craft skills and our linguistic ability have led to the wealth of material-borne forms of artistic expression we see today: crafts, visual arts, architecture, literature, design, fashion etc. And, as I have said, craft in all its forms was and is one of the fundamental prerequisites for what we consider to be culture.

Prehistoric forms of artistic expression have been believed to meet human needs of a religious and magical nature (Janson & Janson 1978, pp. 31–36). To describe today the needs met by art as magical or religious probably feels foreign to most people (who can be presumed to be reading this text). Yet it is still possible, for the now modern and enlightened individual, to allow themselves to be fulfilled and captured by art and its forms of expression. Even in the modern human, art can fill us with wonder, and still today it gives meaning to existence – magical or not.

Since it first emerged, art has fulfilled various types of human needs, such as those of religion, ritual and magic. We can also assume that groups have used art to demonstrate their group belonging (via the design of clothing, jewellery and tattoos, for example). Individuals have presumably also exploited the opportunity to express themselves on the personal level via various forms of artistic and aesthetic materialities. Art still meets all these needs today. Fundamentally, in my view, this has involved the need to express what it is to be human.

This way of describing art is not uncontroversial. For example, there is an academic discussion about the extent to which prehistoric art should be considered art at all (Rosengren 2015, pp.19–24).
In this context, the modern concept of art is not very old, and our way of perceiving art cannot automatically be transferred to our ancestors. To do so risks leading ourselves astray, because it is not possible to know how earlier humans themselves perceived the forms of expression they created. It is not at all certain that they perceived them as art according to the concepts we have today. The late American art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto has addressed this issue in depth. In his well-known essay The Artworld (Danto 1964), he presents the idea that the art world’s theorists comprise the institution that has the power to define what is art or not. The article has a section on prehistoric art. He writes: “It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible. It would, I should think, never have occurred to the painters of Lascaux that they were producing art on those walls. Not unless there were neolithic aestheticians.”(Danto 1964, p. 58).

What was it that the painters in the Lascaux caves really depicted if it was not art? And why? The phrasing of this quotation undeniably makes us think. The quotation says that it is the art theorist who makes art’s existence possible. In relation to art, the theorist’s work is more important than the painter’s and precedes the painting’s possible status as art. It is impossible to say what the painters are doing before the theorist formulates a theory that explains it and then possibly classifies the paintings as art. Danto explains that every era must be ready for the phenomenon that emerges in it. That is why there was no flight insurance in the Middle Ages or typewriter erasers in the Etruscan period (Danto 1964, p. 58). The examples are somewhat confusing. With regard to the Etruscans’ typewriter erasers: should we interpret that to mean, like the cave art example, that typewriter erasers became typewriter erasers only after the theorists formulated the theory that made them typewriter erasers?

Here a craft perspective provides an interesting entry point which can lead the discussion further. In my view it is obvious that the cave paintings are paintings (Danto also seems to agree on this), regardless of whether they are considered to be art or not. From a craft perspective, it is also obvious that the paintings correspond to other paintings. They are part of the same craft tradition. Within that tradition, some of the resulting artefacts are
undoubtedly considered to be art. In this way, the cave paintings’ connections with art are obvious. The discussion about how the cave paintings should be categorised, from the starting point of our modern understanding of the concept of art, effectively hides the connecting factor comprised by the craft. If we forget this, it can seem as if there is no common link between the Neolithic paintings and ones closer to our own time. From such a point of view, the cave paintings become difficult and perhaps even impossible to interpret and place in a context.

It seems to me that Western culture sometimes has a slightly overheated relationship with words, concepts and theories. If older paintings lie beyond our ability to interpret them based on the ruling definition of art and the concept of art, then the same should hold true for all historical human expressions and impressions. Reasonably, attempts to interpret older texts would therefore also be in vain. Our way of understanding what a text is, is coloured by its contemporary context in the same way as our understanding of what art is.88 Taken to its logical conclusion, based on such a reasoning we stand perplexed at our history and our context. Nothing in history can be interpreted. History cannot say anything of relevance to those of us alive today.

With the aid of a craft perspective, however, everything does not have to be so ephemeral and impossible to understand and interpret as we might sometimes believe based on a theoretical and philosophical viewpoint. A person possessing craft skills can say in concrete terms how something is made and what level of skill was required. This is something that the archaeologist and ceramist Katarina Botwid has drawn attention to in her recently submitted doctoral dissertation (Botwid 2016). In her research she has explored how this craft-based ability to interpret objects can be a tool in archaeological work. She speaks of the craft perspective’s interpretive ability and describes, among other things, how, with the aid of this ability, it is possible to gain a perception of the time and effort which the older craft people invested in acquiring their skills.

88 Here there is an interesting paradox: this type of academic text craft that has produced these ideas that art in a historical perspective perhaps cannot at all be labelled as art, seems to have a more trusting view of texts. Texts would appear to be interpreted as texts even in a historical perspective.
Skills that enabled them to do what they did. Moreover, given the effort and time it must have taken to become as good at painting or writing as many of the historical artefacts indicate, it is reasonable to assume that these practices of painting and writing have been considered relevant and significant ever since they first arose. It is also reasonable to assume that the significance accorded to both these practices involves their capacity to express and communicate important matters. They are linguistic craft practices that create social meaning. Prehistoric art may not be art from the perspective of modern art theory, but seen from a craft perspective, the art of painting is always the art of painting and the art of writing is always the art of writing. People who practised these crafts did so to express something, just as the people who write and paint today are still trying to do.

**CRAFT’S LINGUISTIC POTENTIAL**

I have repeatedly addressed the issue of craft people’s ability to express themselves via their handiwork. In this context, “express” can be understood as the phenomenon that makes it possible for humans to communicate with each other and thereby participate in social groups. If craft makes it possible to express oneself – is it therefore also possible to regard all human expressions as the result of a craft process? I will now evaluate this idea.

Let me assume, as my earlier line of thinking suggests, that all artistic possibilities of expression require that the artist has a craft skill. A person who has a craft skill in combination with an insight into how that skill can be used for artistic purposes then becomes an artist. According to such a definition, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, even Marcel Duchamp was an (art) craft person when at the beginning of the 20th century he claimed that the urinal he submitted to an art salon in New York was art. By his action, he placed a large question mark on how we should regard the artistic artefact and its meaning and also the meaning of its creation process. The urinal...
already existed and Duchamp was not involved in its creation process. From an art history perspective, it may be the first ready-made work. But although with that prank he turned upside down all the prevailing ideas about craft and its role in artistic creation, Duchamp based his own artistic creative process on a form of craft skill. Duchamp crafted concepts. The process does not revolve around the type of physical skills and dexterity that is normally associated with artistic creativity. Acquiring a urinal, signing it, and transporting it to a gallery does not require a developed craft skill in the usual sense. The practical work with the urinal is not the central focus. Nor is that where the crafting of the concept occurs. Instead, the important aspect of the craft process is how he uses verbal linguistic means to persistently and purposefully contextualise the event and the object, which over time gave the work and himself iconic status in the art canon. Quite simply, he talks and writes about his work. He replaces art's traditional materials (marble, clay, oil paint, bronze etc.) with words and text. It is therefore also wrong to regard the craft skill which Duchamp uses as trivial. Talking and writing are not trivial skills, even though we have a tendency to take this knowledge for granted and forget that the ability to formulate, articulate and write are linked to and dependent on our physical abilities. When we were very young we all devoted great energy and persistence to acquiring the skills so that we could participate in the linguistic communities around us. Speech continues to be just as advanced a physical skill as it has always been. And even though writing has been made easier thanks to technological progress, the skills that make it possible are far from trivial.

Duchamp is a highly skilled conceptual craft person. He knows his abilities and can utilise them shrewdly. One very important ability is his prescient way of understanding the concept of art in relation to the prevailing social context. He sees the possibility and seizes it. Via his crafting of concepts he shakes up the concept of art.

Logically, it would be fully in line with the above reasoning to claim that all linguistic activities are dependent on a physical and practical skill, because all human languageness must be given material form in order to reach other people. The expanded concept
of craft then does not stop at the linguistic forms of expression that can be described as artistic. It applies to all forms of languageness, all forms of expression, to which the verbal ones of course also belong. The expanded definition of the concept of craft drains it of its everyday content. According to this expanded definition, everyone who deliberately communicates with the world around them is engaged in a process of linguistic crafting. The production of linguistic forms of expression requires linguistic craft.

This is a very philosophical way of looking at craft. Here – where the primary focus is on material expressions of an artistic nature – it is meaningful to hold on to the more down-to-earth definition of the concept of craft that I gave originally. However, this more down-to-earth understanding of the concept should at the same time be considered in relation to the linguistic dimension to which the expanded definition opens the door. Craft and craft skill contain a communicative possibility. All communication requires some craft. When giving form to languageness, it is not possible to avoid craft. This point of view is the basis of why I regard clay as a linguistic medium. Via the ceramist’s hands, clay can become a language.

Regarding clay as a linguistic material has been so self-evident for me that I have had no reason to think about it. However, this situation has changed for me (see page 36–37), and based on a new situation I realise that I must both think about and make a case for the reasonableness of perceiving clay as a linguistic material. How valid is it to regard the ceramist’s practice as linguistic, and how relevant is a concept such as clay-based languageness?

Thus far in my attempts at reasoning, I have placed artistic practice in a linguistic field and I have defined linguistic practice as being craft dependent. Is it possible to develop and deepen this line of reasoning?

LANGUAGE SIMILARITIES AND LANGUAGENESSES

In this context, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s thoughts about language again become interesting. He thought a lot about language and its limits. What is a language? How does it work? He encourages
us to think about the word “game” (Wittgenstein 2009, §66). The concept includes many different types of game: board games, ball games, ring games etc. It is not clear what these games have in common other than they are called games. Some of the games have so little in common with each other that it is hard to understand how they can be included in the same concept. Yet Wittgenstein believes there is some characteristic of every game that it shares with another game. There is “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: similarities in the large and in the small” (Wittgenstein 2009, §66).

The games share a family relationship. They resemble each other just as the members of a family can resemble each other. They share family resemblances. This does not mean that all the family members must share any one individual characteristic. Based on family resemblance, it is not possible to single out any individual characteristic that defines a family member of the games family. “One can say that the concept of a game is a concept with blurred edges.” (Wittgenstein 2009, §71). Wittgenstein considers how a concept with “blurred edges” can be useable. Surely in principle we must strive to define as clearly as possible each individual concept and give the words as precise a content as possible? Wittgenstein argues that it is not possible to account for and precisely delimit the meaning of every concept and nor is it desirable. Blurriness is needed to make the language useable. It makes it possible, with language’s help, to construct new and not previously formulated meanings. Blurriness opens the doors to imagination and creativity.

Concepts are elastic to varying degrees and can thereby be used for purposes we do not yet know. Striving to precisely define each concept’s meaning so that it corresponds to a given meaning applicable to all situations does not make a language more able to create meaning but rather less able. This should not be interpreted to mean that there are no rules to relate to when we use language, only that rules and conceptual content can vary depending on the situation. This is true more or less in the same way as there are different rules for different

20 The German word spiel in the original text has an additional meaning than the Swedish word “spel” [or the English “game”]. The German concept also includes the idea of play. In relation to the artistic creative process in focus here, the German term is better.
games and even different rules for the same game depending on the
time and place.

“I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the
activities into which it is woven, a ‘language-game’” (Wittgenstein
2009, § 7). Here Wittgenstein uses the concept of “language-game”
in a general way to refer to language as a whole, but he also speaks
of language-games as various kinds of special cases. Special rules
apply to every special case. One such special case could be clay-
based languageness. How can this language-game be understood?
One given is that it is based on clay. Clay is the linguistic medium
for clay-based languageness in about the same way as sound is for
spoken language. In order for clay-based languageness to arise,
there must be an intention and a craft skill that can give the clay
form. The same is true for speech. The speaker must be able
to articulate themselves and have an intention, an idea about what is
to be said. The philosopher (and chemist) Michael Polanyi describes
speech and the art of speaking in line with this reasoning. He says
that speech and the art of speaking can be schematically divided
into a number of levels. For speech it is necessary to have the
production of: (1) voice, (2) words, (3) sentences, (4) style and (5)
literary composition. Each level is governed by given conditions,
rules and normative systems. These can be summarised as follows:
(1) phonetics, (2) lexicography, (3) grammar, (4) stylistic and (5)
literary criticism (Polanyi 2009, p.35: cf. Medbo 2022. p.9-12). It is
worth noting that someone can be a good speaker without have
any particular knowledge of phonetics, lexicography, grammar and
so on. The rules that apply to clay-based and spoken communication
can be applied by the practitioner without any knowledge of rule
descriptions and theories. A feeling for language is a form of applied
rules knowledge that does not require verbalised knowledge of rules
and theories. The same applies to a feeling for form.

According to Polanyi, there is a hierarchy between the levels,
whereby the first one comprises the conditions for the second one
and so on. The previous level often becomes subconscious (or tacit,
as Polanyi says) when the next level is achieved. This occurs when
the previous level has been internalised. When we are speaking
fluently, we do not think consciously about our articulation or
which words we should choose etc. In this sense, the process follows the same pattern as that found in a craft skill. If there is a break somewhere in the chain, awareness becomes concentrated on the link where the break occurs.

If I organise clay-based languageness according to the above example, it might look like this. The production of clay-based languageness requires: (1) manual dexterity, (2) form, texture (3) composition (4) ceramic style and (5) ceramic composition. And then there are these levels' conditions and rules: (1) craft knowledge, (2) material knowledge, (3) form knowledge, (4) knowledge about ceramic styles and traditions and (5) ceramic criticism. Even though my way of placing clay's languageness within a system similar to the one Polanyi applies to the art of speaking has its defects, it still becomes clear that there are obvious structural similarities between spoken language and the languageness that acquires form through clay. The spoken language-game and the clay-based language-game are in a family relationship with each other and have clear similarities. It also becomes clear that form is a part of language and the language-game. An inadequate ability to articulate will be an obstacle to the intention behind the speech. Of course, the same relationship applies to clay-based languageness. Form is also a decisive factor in linguistic practice. In both examples it is clear that the form is dependent on a knowledge of skills. In addition, in accordance with the expanded definition of the concept of craft, it is obvious that the craft (the skills knowledge) is of decisive importance in both types of language-game.

There are similarities between the language-games but also differences. A clay-based languageness is not nearly so central to humans' social life as is spoken and written language. However, as part of a material-based visual and tactile culture, clay-based languageness is not without importance. With regard to text, it is also possible to develop a line of reasoning about the relationship between form and content. In the text-based language-game, a text can be perceived as possessing a given and fixed linguistic content. The text has a literary form that is distinct from the

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21 When speech is created, the voice cannot be compared to clay. The voice's material is air which is made to vibrate. In clay-based languageness it is the clay which is made to "vibrate" by dexterity.
physical form. We can say that the text constitutes a concept and the physical form adopted by the text can be regarded as a packaging without any intrinsic significance for its content. Within visual art, the idea of content independent of its physical manifestation played a decisive role for the artists and theorists who launched conceptual art in the 1960s (see Chapter 5).

Might there also exist a content element that can be perceived as distinct from the physical form given to the clay in the clay-based language-game? The debate about form versus content is a familiar one. The discussion is based on the idea that it is possible to create a dichotomy between form and content. To return to Wittgenstein, I interpret his concept of language-games to mean that form and content should be viewed as one. Creating form is an activity that is part of the language-game and it can therefore not be separated from the communication emerging from that game. Form is content and becomes content in every language-game, and it is based on a fallacy to regard the two of them – form and content – as separate. There is no content if it is not given a form. Form is content.

Naturally, there are large differences between what can be communicated via speech and writing and via a clay-based language. For example, a text can be very explicit and thereby be used to achieve clear and predetermined purposes. Examples of this might be texts in the form of instructions for use – do this, legal texts – don’t do that, or art theories – this is art and this is not. All these texts have a clear practical purpose and function. These examples also show the texts’ authoritarian aspect. The texts in these examples exhort, forbid, categorise and set boundaries. Their clear practical application can perhaps be compared with a ceramist’s production of utility objects such as bowls, mugs and pots, although the power perspective in the latter case is perhaps not so clearly present. What is clear, however, is that in both cases the function is decisive for the form.

My aim with this line of reasoning about art’s languageness is not designed to equate what we in everyday language mean by language – that is, spoken and written language – and the expressions of art. There are key differences between how humans use verbal language to express themselves and how they use non-verbal
ways to express themselves, and what I as a ceramist am seeking to achieve with my clay-based languageness is about something other than what can be achieved with everyday verbal languageness. The linguistic materialities have different qualities and characteristics. Different language-games have their own limitations and possibilities. However, the differences should not be exaggerated. I believe that, in terms of its content, what I am trying to formulate with the help of clay can come close to what poets and authors are trying to formulate with words. This does not involve stating something clear and unambiguous along the lines of the prohibiting, instructional and theoretical texts. For me as a ceramist, clay's languageness operates within an emotional and existential dimension, without me therefore perceiving any limits on what artistic creativity and imagination can use it for. Languages and languagenesses are a material for creativity. I am convinced that clay's languageness will never totally allow itself to be translated into text or speech. I find something attractive in the idea that there are differences between what can be conveyed in clay and what can be conveyed in words. The fact that one of these cannot replace the other also explains why a concept such as ceramic art, or art in general, exists at all.

However, even though clay-based languageness cannot be equated with the verbal-based, it is clear that the boundaries between the various linguistic practices are not razor sharp and that in some respects the similarities overshadow the differences. For example, gestures and pantomime add expressive possibilities, nuances and depth to a spoken language-game. The fact is that it is perfectly easy to communicate emotions and moods only with the help of pantomime and body language. They comprise in themselves a type of language-game. Physically being in the same place as one's communication partner is of great importance to this language-game.

Virtually all methods of self-expression can be used for artistic purposes. In my view, it is completely reasonable to include all the language materialities from which art borrows in the family of language-games that Wittgenstein speaks about. Art communicates something, and at best it communicates something that cannot fully be captured by language-games that are not considered to
be artistic. Like all other language-games, all those of art follow their own rules. Among other things, not least in art, it has become apparent that all the different methods of human self-expression can easily be absorbed by and cross-fertilise each other and generally behave promiscuously. New versions of language-games are constantly being born, but in each individual game, at each individual time and place, there exist certain given possibilities and limitations. There are certain rules.

Another intention behind placing art’s – in my case clay’s – expression within this linguistic context is that it makes apparent the ethical dimension associated with language and language practice. In this respect, Wittgenstein’s simile between language and game also functions well for drawing attention to this relationship. In order for a language-game to be perceived as a game, the game’s participants must share perceptions about the game’s rules and its meaning. They must agree both on the game’s rules and on what is meaningful about being involved in the game. To those people who unhesitatingly indulge in a language-game, this relationship is self-evident. It can be so self-evident that the participants are not even aware of the rules or think of the game as a game.

Regardless of whether or not a person considers the game to be a game, some people can be interested in actively controlling a game and taking on the role of the referee. There can also be unwilling participants and people who watch it from the outside with no particular interest or any desire to join it. Seen from outside, a language-game can also appear incomprehensible. The outside world can raise questions about a language-game’s validity, and it is not self-evident that the game’s rules are understood or accepted. To every language-game there belongs a power game.

The following chapter is an in-depth exploration of the power game that belongs to a language game. First, though, I will make a general philosophical reflection. This section has been somewhat difficult to place. The text could just as well have been included under the next chapter heading, as it revolves around the issue of the handyman’s and the craft person’s responsibility and role in society. But the issue is of a linguistic nature, which is why I have chosen to place it here.
THE IMMANENT ETHICS OF PRODUCTION

In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle draws a distinction between art (which involves making things) and practical wisdom (which involves action). Making things requires proficiency (techne) and action requires practical wisdom (phronesis). Techne is an ability that can lead to achieving an established goal. Craft skill belongs to the techne type of knowledge. With regard to action, it is a goal in and of itself. Action belongs to the social (political) sphere, whereas making things can be regarded as a more instrumental activity. The following quotation contains a description that encapsulates how Aristotle distinguishes between these two activities: “in art a man who makes a mistake voluntarily is preferable to one who makes it involuntarily; but in practical wisdom, as every virtue or excellence, such a man is less desirable. Thus it is clear that practical wisdom is an excellence or virtue and not an art.” (Aristotle 1962, p. 154).

It is reasonable to place crafts (and fine crafts) under the heading of making things. I return to my experience of throwing in order to shed light on the conflict-filled and confusing situation a craft person can end up in with regard to action and making things. It was the summer after my first year at Konstfack that I got my job as a thrower in the café of Gustavsbergs Porslinsfabrik. Quite a large part of the preceding year at Konstfack had been devoted to studio work led by the ceramist Kennet Williamsson. He had made possible a new understanding of throwing and I was strengthened in my earlier conviction that throwing was a valuable skill. I now also understood that throwing was very much an artistic practice. But by the end of the summer a doubt had crept in. Was this skill relevant? I had believed that the thrown ceramic ware produced at Gustavsberg spoke to me. I had wanted to become a participant in the thrown conversation via my own throwing. But now I had realised that the thrown languageness that had been developed at Gustavsbergs Porslinsfabrik would become silent. The vases I had made were clearly not needed, either as vases or as ceramic ware that spoke.
There often arises a gap between our intention behind an action and the result we discover it leads to. When an intention is put into practice, it can land somewhere totally different from its intended destination. Yet we are still accountable before ourselves and others. This is an existential problem. A person who makes things and is part of the production process ends up in this problematic situation in a particular way. As I have explained previously, in a craft such as throwing there is a meaning that is directed inwards to the person who is doing the action. There is therefore a risk that the doing of the action becomes in itself such a strong driving force that the doer of the action is not able or “forgets” to think at all about what need their action fulfills over and above inner gratification. It can also happen that the framework that surrounds the making process impedes reflection about and the assumption of responsibility for the impact of that process on the world. This side of the problem has possibly grown since Aristotle’s days, even if the production conditions back then were not ideal either (a fact which the enslaved of that time would presumably be able to bear witness to). For very many of the people who work in production today, the question of what is being produced is secondary. The production process is nothing that the individual worker has any influence over or even needs to understand the point of. Many people participate in the production process only to earn money and support themselves. Many are forced to do work which they would have rejected if they had been able to. In this context, therefore, my misgivings about production are those of the privileged. The misgivings of the craft person. But my misgivings do intersect with broader issues of a more general nature.

Sociologist Richard Sennett writes about the set of problems which has been raised. He goes back to antiquity and the myth of Pandora’s box, using it to highlight the risk of destructiveness that always follows when humans, driven by their curiosity, lift the lid of the box. He illustrates the problem with Robert Oppenheimer’s description of his work with the first atomic bomb: “When you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it and you argue about it only after you have had your technical success.
This is the way it was with the atomic bomb" (Oppenheimer quoted in Sennett 2009, p. 2). The technical crafting challenge and the scientific curiosity became such strong driving forces that during his work with the bomb, Oppenheimer was not seriously able to reflect on its horrendous destructive potential.

Sennett refers to Hanna Arendt. In The Human Condition (Arendt 1958) she writes about labour, work and action. By her definition, labour is that work which is required for our survival and reproduction, and which is therefore eternal and never ending. We are doomed by this work. By work, Arendt means production. This creates the material world of objects that is the prerequisite for our civilisation. Fundamentally, the idea here is that it is productive work in the form of production which distinguishes us from animals and makes us humans. Production is to some extent autonomous and does not have the animalistic slave character attributed to labour for our survival. There is a beginning and an end to this production. The concept of action refers to humans when they assume the responsibility to think, talk, and reflect together with their fellow humans. Action is fundamentally a political and moral activity. In this context, action should primarily be understood as a linguistic action. Sennett refers to the concepts of animal laborans and homo faber (Sennett 2009, p. 6), which are terms Arendt uses in The Human Condition. Sennett says that animal laborans is the working, slaving human – someone who is not able to consider the consequences of their work but instead regards the work itself as the meaning – as a “must”. Sennett says that Oppenheimer belonged to this category when he allowed the work on the bomb to become a meaning in and of itself. In Sennett’s view, homo faber – the creating individual – is someone who is not actually involved in material production in any real sense. Instead, this is someone who discusses and assesses together with other humans. It is the person who asks the question “why?”. According to Sennett’s interpretation, this being is superior to animal laborans due to the former’s ability to take political and moral action. To the extent that animal laborans is at all capable of thinking about the consequences of their work, their reflections, as with Oppenheimer, happen afterwards, when
it is already too late, when an irreversible path has already been taken. As a craft person who throws ceramic ware, I recognise this complex of problems.

At Gustavsberg I was captivated by the work itself – the craft – and found meaning in it. It was a meaning which outside its context dissolved or at least threatened to dissolve. My throwing at Gustavsberg could be perceived as meaningless and thereby also unaware. I could not really predict how what I was doing would make its mark on the world. One thing that distinguishes my lack of awareness from that of Robert Oppenheimer is, of course, the gigantic difference in our production’s potential consequences when it does make its mark on the world. From this perspective it might seem strange to compare throwing pottery with making atomic bombs, but the comparison is not so farfetched as it might initially appear. Making atomic bombs is a craft. Peter Dormer describes the possibility that the craft knowledge necessary to be able to make the bombs “risks” being lost when the production of the bombs becomes so limited that the knowledge cannot practically be exchanged between generations (Dormer 2010, p.148). Both the production of atomic bombs and throwing pottery are based on a craft skill that is best learned in practice.

Sennett argues that Arendt’s clear-cut separation between homo faber and animal laborans is based on a simplification (Sennett 2009, p. 7). He says that production understood from the craft person’s perspective always contains some kind of mental reflection – if not together with other humans, then about and in relation to the material being used by the craft person. This view actually illustrates precisely what Arendt is critical about with regard to production: that the reflection is mostly about the work itself. That the maker poses the question “how” and not the question “why”. In addition, I find it rather unclear as to whether Sennett is really using the concepts of homo faber and animal laborans in accordance with Arendt’s definition of them. She writes about an acting person as someone who assumes responsibility within a community. In my view she does not mean homo faber here. True, homo faber can, via their own production, find themselves in a social context, but they do not assume responsibility in the same way as the acting person does. (Arendt 1958, pp.22–3).
I interpret homo faber to be the individual who allows themselves, without reflection, to be steered by technological, scientific and economic considerations. This is, admittedly, someone who can and must reflect about their own practical work, but not primarily based on political and ethical considerations. For this very reason, the activities of homo faber often have such large and unforeseen political and ethical consequences. However, the extent to which Sennett has made a reasonable interpretation of Arendt on this point is not the main issue here. I agree with Sennett that the clear-cut difference Arendt makes between the producing individual and the political, ethical and linguistically active individual gives an oversimplified picture of something that is in reality more complex. This is particularly true with regard to the artistically creative individual.

For me as an artistically practising craft person, the two forms of existence – the producing and the acting individual – merge inescapably. As an artist I represent both forms at the same time when I make something. In my role as an artist, making something is fundamentally a linguistic action, which indicates that production cannot be fully separated from action.

Even language in the form of text and speech is produced. Even material culture – in the form of its objects and artefacts – speaks to us. The production process has a linguistic potential that reaches its full expression in material-based art. Admittedly, Arendt does regard art as an expression of the human capacity for thought and reflection (Arendt 1958, p. 168). However, with the sharp distinction she makes between production and action, it is easy to forget that even art is produced. An artist thus has to handle the problems of both production and action at the same time. My starting point for the following discussion is that most art workers, consciously or intuitively, understand that art is fundamentally a linguistic practice.

Historically, the craft person can be said to have represented precisely this type of person. Before the division of labour resulted in the emergence of occupational categories such as engineers and scientists, it was craft people who explored and drove technological development.
Chapter 5

The theory practice
“That works very well in practice, but how does it work in theory?”

A THEORETICAL TURN

I have chosen to describe the changes in the craft field in recent decades as a theoretical turn. In general, in relation to the prevailing concept of art, changes to the rules of the game of an art discipline must be considered a very normal occurrence. It is the normal condition of (post)modern art to test its limits. The concept of art (like the concept of craft) is in a constant state of flux. Craft is therefore no exception, even though due to its historical background it can be regarded as one of the more conservative parts of the art field. A few examples of significant changes within the craft field include the post-war studio craft movement, in which (among others) ceramicist Bernard Leach’s thoughts and practices were of great importance (see Leach 1945). This was followed in the 1960s by a craft field that moved away from the functional aesthetic advocated by Leach and towards a more expressive type of craft influenced by visual art (Robach 2010).

An art field that is mobile and dynamic opens itself up to new possibilities. It often leads to increased artistic freedom. As long as the development leads in such a direction, it is reasonable to welcome it. However, changes are in and of themselves no guarantee of artistic freedom and diversity.

In this chapter I will explore how the theoretical turn in the craft field can be regarded in relation to linguistic diversity and the freedom of art. As I have outlined in the preceding chapter, it is possible to regard clay-based languageness as a language-game – one among all the others in the art field. And, as previously explained, each language-game has its own power game associated with it. In accordance with this analogy of the game, this chapter focuses on the rules of the game. How are the rules constructed and how do they govern the game? Based on which ideas

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23 I have not been able to link the above quote to any specific person but it is highly likely that it was inspired by the following quote from Immanuel Kant: “This may be true in theory, but it does not apply in practice” (Kant 1970, p. 63).
and ideologies are the rules created? And, finally: Are the rules good as they are, or can they be written in another way that might make the game freer, richer, and more democratic?

Changes within the field and the new type of craft have been explored in studies on craft theory (see Veiteberg 2005; Bull 2007; Mazanti 2006). However, these studies do not label these changes as a theoretical turn. Instead, they are described more as the breakthrough of concept crafting. But however we might want to label the changes undergone by the craft field over the past 20 to 25 years, they rest heavily on, and have been dependent on, the support of theory practice. Fundamentally, these changes are about how the concept of craft and thereby craft itself should be understood and defined.

Two groups of people in this field are particularly important to how the concept of craft is shaped and reshaped. They are the practising craft people and the practising craft theorists. Every new work produced by a craft person is to a tiny extent involved in influencing the definition of the concept. The same holds true for the theorists. Every text that is produced has an influence on views about what craft is. But the conditions for how both these groups exert their influence differ. The theory-producing practice can be said to have the purpose of actively engaging with views about what craft is. The theorist shapes definitions and creates concepts. A similar explicit concept-crafting task cannot be attributed to the craft practitioner, whose goal is instead to create qualitative artistic statements. Only a limited number of craft practitioners have the stated goal of changing, within the limits of their practice, the definition of the concept of craft. Whatever the case, through this theoretical turn, the normative influence of theory practice within the field has increased considerably.

My interest here thus concerns theory practice. This is where we find the actors – usually within academia – who have the professional opportunity to produce theory. I will focus in particular on theorists who have assumed leading positions and have driven the theoretical turn taken by the field. My selection has a geographical limit – in this case, the Scandinavian context. The Anglo-Saxon influence has been strong in Scandinavia, and this will be reflected
in my examples. All the individuals mentioned here have or have had high positions within the institutional environment in which theory has been produced.

As a researching craft person, I have attended many craft seminars that focused on the theory of craft. I have of course also discussed this topic with my colleagues. In these contexts, a few names have repeatedly arisen. This has influenced my selection. The selection is a personal one and it has not been my ambition to write an objective history of the craft field’s contemporary theory practice. My aim here is to uncover the ideologies which, sometimes perhaps unexamined, govern the thought patterns within this influential theory practice, and I have chosen my examples accordingly.

My approach draws both emotional and methodological inspiration from the theory practice which I intend to explore here. As an artistic researcher, I make the most of this opportunity to critically assess the theory practice and thereby to contribute to the theory construction around that practice.

THE EXTERNAL CONDITIONS OF ART AND CRAFT

Before I explore the ideological foundation of contemporary craft theory, however, I would like to briefly place craft within a broader social context. External changes in society have contributed to, and partly created the conditions for, the movement that has driven the redefinition of the concept of craft in recent decades. However, in contrast to the transformative power which the theory construction of craft exerts on the craft field, these broader phenomena are basically indifferent to craft itself.

At the end of the 20th century only a fragment still survived of the art industry, which has historically been of great importance to the craft field. In a financially driven globalisation process, manual production has been transferred from the developed world to countries with cheaper labour costs and weaker trade unions. The art industry was no exception. Previously, in terms of the Swedish situation, the art industry had functioned as a reference point for craft. From a practitioner’s perspective, the former had been
something both to distance oneself from and to be inspired by. And perhaps even something to be absorbed by. In the empty space that arose in the wake of the art industry, this power to define was displaced from the practical, producing a side of the field to the theory-producing side of the field.

In my view, though, the single most important one of these external circumstances was the major changes to the art education system that characterised the late 20th century. Sweden’s higher institutions of art education became third-level institutions as a result of the 1977 higher education reform (Edling 2010, pp. 11-15). At first, this did not change much. When I was a student at Konstfack from 1986 to 1992, there was no noticeable academic influence in the strict sense of the term. We were given a professor, Signe Persson Melin, instead of a head instructor. A change of title, not much more. We students did not produce texts in the form of project descriptions, degree reports and course evaluations which today hold such a central place in art education programmes. Instead, in accordance with the previously prevailing practice in such programmes, the focus lay on what was created in workshops and studios and in the shared, usually verbal, thought process which created a framework for that work.

The harmonisation of Europe’s tertiary educational system in accordance with the Bologna Accord of 1999 increased the speed of this process of change. The Accord states that the organisation of educational levels, examination procedures, course structure and syllabuses in Europe’s tertiary educational system should be harmonised. (Edling 2010, p. 13). Broadly speaking, post-secondary arts programmes therefore now conform to a general European standard. Among other things, this standard states that grades and credits shall be given, cheating shall be punished, and degrees shall be quality assured, validated and documented (Edling 2010, pp. 11-15).

This development can be understood from a broader perspective in which ideas about measurability and quality assurance have come to play an ever more important role, not least politically. The idea that quality can be captured and assured by being quantified and measured (NPM – New Public Management – is based on this idea) has become widely adopted. It exerts great influence on the
The entire public sector, which includes educational institutions and systems, things that cannot be measured and documented are difficult to include within these systems. For academia, this means that the view of knowledge is affected. Knowledge becomes a quantity that can be measured. The more knowledge and knowledge production that the universities can deliver, the better (Ahlbäck Öberg 2016). It is assumed that, like other products, knowledge can be quality assured based on preset templates. As a logical consequence of such a view, a financial steering system now applies in the higher education system whereby student throughput and the number of study credits produced are decisively important to how funding is allocated between the tertiary educational institutions (UKÄ 2016).

The concept of education becomes less influential and knowledge is increasingly viewed from an instrumental perspective. Education and knowledge should benefit society and be profitable. Employability is a concept that arises more and more frequently in discussions about knowledge and education. One telling example of this is the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise’s publication Konsten att strula till ett liv – Om ungdomars irrvägar mellan skola och arbete (The art of messing up a life – On young people’s errant paths between school and work) (Fölster, S. & Kreicbergs J. & Sahlén, M. 2011). In this work, the authors argue that tertiary educational programmes should be evaluated based on the socio-economic return on investment they are likely to give. The more employable a student is after their training, the better. The idea is that differentiated study funding can then be used to steer students towards the programmes that are profitable from a socio-economic and business-economic perspective. The educational concept that students should freely seek out the knowledge they want, which has been an ideal within academia ever since the days of Wilhelm von Humboldt (Liedman 1999: 227–242), appears ever more remote.

This set of issues applies to academia as a whole. However, this evaluation culture leads to particular problems for art education programmes. In its wake, texts and their production acquire ever greater importance. In the art education programmes, the students’ textual documents are required documentation for the quality evaluation system applied there. When quality must be assured, texts
- such as degree project reports and project descriptions – function better than the artistic works created by the students. When text production takes up more space, it does so at the expense of the artistic works (Nobel 2014:138–140). This also leads to a situation where one kind of art fits into the system better than another kind. In the educational system, as in contemporary craft theory, forms of expression are favoured which are clearly linked to a discursive and textual conceptuality. The following quote from Jorunn Veiteberg, a Norwegian craft theorist and until 2016 a visiting professor at HDK, describes this phenomenon: “As a writer it is easy to become seduced by the conceptual, because it is much easier to discuss art which comments on art – a beautiful and exquisite plate by Kennet Williamsson is much harder to discuss than a manipulated ready-made by Kjell Rylander” (Veiteberg 2006:47).

That was a brief sketch of the external background against which I now intend to explore craft’s inner and theory-driven process of change.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THE THEORY PRACTICE

I will begin by depicting a few of my own encounters with the contemporary theory practice of craft which made an impression on me. I have chosen the examples for their clarity. They create a picture of the tone of the discussion and also make visible some of the ideas on which the theory practice rests.

In 2012, in my capacity as a researching craft person, I was one of the invited exhibitors in the Making Knowledge exhibition at the Gustavberg Konsthall venue for contemporary crafts. The exhibition presented the works of four craft people who in different ways were or had been associated with artistic research in the topic of craft. The participants were Caroline Slotte and Kjell Rylander from the Norwegian side and Frida Hållander and myself from the Swedish one. A public seminar was held in conjunction with the exhibition, with a focus on the research in the field. One of the speakers, Christina Zetterlund, who was Professor of Design and Craft Theory at Konstfack, launched what was for me a new
concept. She spoke about craft’s “pillow room” (Zetterlund 2012). She said that in this pillow room, conservative, bourgeois, middle-class values with an excluding effect were cultivated. The room can be regarded as a container for conserving outmoded views and as a protected workshop for those craft people who, through their craft practice, can be considered to share those views.

My second example comes from the seminar “Mapping Contemporary Crafts Theory” which HDK organised together with the Röhsska Museum in autumn 2013. As the title suggests, it was a seminar about contemporary craft theory. The seminar was well attended and a number of well-known and internationally recognised writers and theorists were invited to speak. They included Ezra Shales, who was then Associate Professor at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Certainly I was not the only one to react when he called upon us in the audience to burn the book A Theory of Craft (Risatti 2007). I have read the book, and the image of craft it presents can be said to be idealised. A criticism of its contents would be totally reasonable, but the call to burn it was still startling.

Contemporary literature about craft theory can literally describe some of the actors within the craft field as mentally ill. In The Invention of Craft (Adamson 2013), Glenn Adamson – whose list of merits includes having been head of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York and former head of research at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London – takes on the role of therapist for the mentally ill. He does so with the intention of curing the mental illness from which parts of the field are believed to suffer. The symptoms displayed by the ill patient are: repetitive behaviour, false memories and flashbacks (Adamson 2013, pp. 185–186). The illness makes the patient backward looking and incapable of constructive and forward-looking self-reflection. These ill people are not only a danger to themselves and to craft; they also have a damaging influence on craft and on the social conditions for, and perceptions of, craft in general (Adamson 2013, pp. 181–231).

One last example. In En ny diskurs for kunsthåndverket (A new discourse for craft), Knut A. Bull, an art historian and senior curator at the National Museum in Norway, refers to what he considers to be a general understanding of what craft is: “this art form creates
things that do not reflect reality, but rather things that are part of the reality that visual art reflects. Craft’s products therefore, in contrast to visual art, have no content beyond their own form” (Bull 2007, p. 10). Later, he describes a transition between this type of craft and another new and conceptual type of craft that had begun to emerge on the craft scene by referring to a book by the Norwegian art historian and professor Jorunn Veiteberg. Bull writes: “Her book *Kunsthantverk – fra tause ting til talande objekt* (Craft – from silent thing to speaking object) is a project that aims to capture the transition from the silent craft aesthetic to the speaking one, or concept-based craft, the one that has gained a content” (Bull 2007, p. 23).

Although at first glance these examples can be perceived as somewhat disparate, some things do become clear from them. Something that engages the emotions is at stake. In several of the examples the language being used is drastic and value charged. It also becomes clear that there exists one type of craft which is getting in the way of another. The one that is in the way is outmoded and its practitioners are not mentally well. The type of craft produced by these practitioners can be described as empty and has no content other than its form. It is a type of craft to distance oneself from. It becomes a projection surface against which the exemplary type of craft can more clearly step forward.

From the tone of these examples, it might appear that there is an ongoing animated and perhaps heated conceptual debate between two ideologically opposing sides on the theoretical side of the craft field. However, I have found it difficult to perceive more than one side which has significant influence in the contemporary debate about craft theory. With the exception of the book we were called on to burn, theorists or theoretical writings that express a deviating opinion are thin on the ground. The weighty and influential actors within the theory field appear to be in a high degree of agreement. The debate has a certain degree of asymmetry. From my viewpoint as a practising craft person, it is therefore easy to perceive that the criticism is not primarily aimed at other craft theorists and their theories. To me, it seems to be a reasonable idea that the criticism refers to (some of) us practitioners. We are
the ones who are responsible for the type of craft that is the target of these judgements and criticism. The parental tone, both at the seminars I attended and in the literature I have read, contributes to this interpretation. As a result, I am prepared, in my dual role as academic researcher and craft person, to take on the role of spokesperson for the type of practitioner who, according to the above examples, cowers in the darkness of the pillow room, suffers from mental illness, and has a craft practice that cannot really be said to have a relevant content.

THOSE WHO WANT TO COMMUNICATE AND THOSE WHO DON’T

In order to delve more deeply into how the conceptual foundation of the theory practice can be understood, I refer back to my discussion about Craft in Dialogue (CiD) in the first chapter. In that report, initiated by the Swedish Arts Grants Committee, which preceded and paved the way with the project Det är konstnärtverkets tur (It’s the turn of crafts), craft is depicted as lacking a theory construction (Helgeson 2002, p. 18). This deficiency was also highlighted in CiD. As well as wanting to broaden crafts’ international platform, the project also aimed at creating space for the field’s curators and practitioners who wrote about the field (Zetterlund [ed.] 2006, pp. 19, 23, 36).

Parts of the preparatory study, which dates from 2002, feel surprisingly dated. The study says that craft’s validity is based partly on the fact that it is a necessary prerequisite for design: “the ‘basic research’ of innovative craft is a prerequisite for the entire design field” (Helgeson 2002, p. 10). This instrumental way of regarding craft, however, is not outdated; on the contrary, it still exists today, a topic to which I shall return. However, it is outdated to describe craft as the “most important mirror of our shared folk soul” and “the deepest root of the national aesthetic and material-processing identity” (Helgeson 2002, p. 10). The study strongly emphasises craft’s ability to market Sweden internationally: “Like art and design, craft is a superb way of conveying the image of the Swedish
identity” (Helgeson 2002, p. 10). Thus, over and above its validity to the design field and as a marker of national identity, craft is also important for its PR value for Sweden and Swedishness.

There is an irony in the fact that CiD, which can be said to have been created as a result of this study, is one of the strongest critics of the type of national-chauvinistic assertions like the one expressed in the above quote. CiD did not go along with this way of defining and giving craft legitimacy – despite the fact that its express purpose was to expand and develop the international platform of Swedish craft people and designers. On the contrary, the problematic aspect of the strategy of making national identity a sales pitch for craft was highlighted (Ahl 2006, pp. 27–30). Today, scarcely 15 years after the study was published, it is inconceivable that anyone who wants to be taken seriously in craft circles would so unthinkingly express thoughts which are so clearly linked to this problematic side of the history of craft.

However, CiD’s efforts to focus attention on aspects of craft’s sometimes fairly problematic history does not stop the project from being perceived as excluding some of the field’s practitioners. Love Jönsson, who was a project manager of CiD for a while, points to this: “But after the fact I have understood that many Swedish craft people, a number of them very prominent and with broad international experience, felt that the project was not for them” (Jönsson 2006, p. 24). The quote comes from the evaluation of the project: Craft in Dialogue 2003–2006: Craft is Handmade Communication!. It contains interviews with the other project managers (Zandra Ahl and Päivi Ernkvist) who like Jönsson were linked with CiD. In it, Ernkvist is asked: “What type of craft situation did you start with?”. She describes a type of craft and a body of practitioners that have difficulties in communicating: “Craft has lacked communicative exhibition formats. They have not strongly formulated their exhibitions. This is something that one must do nowadays, not only in order to be visible but also in order to be able to communicate.” She further describes which craft persons the CiD project chose to focus on: “It’s about those ones who want to formulate, communicate, the ones who want to say something” (Ernkvist 2006, p. 21).
One possible interpretation of these assertions is that there exists a type of craft which is indeed visible but which in no way communicates, and, in line with the latter, there must also exist craft people who do not communicate and who have no intention of doing so. The concept of a type of craft that is contentless and non-communicative recurs here. Nor are craft persons who do not want to communicate qualified to participate in the project. The excluding attitude which I have personally experienced can be explained by the fact that I can count myself among the group of craft persons who are considered not to be able to communicate or to want to do so.

In a public activity it is, of course, important that one is visible and able to communicate something to one's audience. From this perspective, it is not hard to understand that Ernkvist dwells on the issue of craft's and craft peoples' inadequate ability to communicate. If, as Ernkvist suggests, craft and craft people are unable to communicate, why might that be? Why did craft find itself in a situation where it lost its ability to communicate? It must be considered plausible that, despite everything, craft did communicate in the past. Otherwise surely this art form would not have existed. Because which audience and practitioners would in the long term be interested in a craft that does not communicate, that does not say anything? Now, though, this situation changed and somewhere along the way craft had lost its ability to speak.

Ernkvist suggests a possible way out of the dilemma in which craft finds itself. She asserts: “Contemporary art – what had been explosive there is no longer the actual object but rather the communication” (Ernkvist 2006, p. 22). Contemporary art and craft differ with regard to communication. Where craft has failed, contemporary art has succeeded. This statement also explains why a craft that does not communicate can still be visible. The communication is not linked to the artistic object/artefact. As a result of this, for Ernkvist it becomes natural to use contemporary art as the model for how craft should once again become communicative. Contemporary art is the role model that craft needs in order to become more communicative and thereby successful.

In Thinking through Craft (Adamson 2007), Glenn Adamson makes a similar analysis of the craft field. He concretises the concept and
gives the example of a practitioner who has not achieved the standard which he considers should apply to a contemporary craft person. Adamson uses the American glass artist Dale Chihuly as this warning example. It is not farfetched to imagine that Chihuly corresponds to the type of craft person who Ernkvist indirectly sets up as the opposite of the craft people who “want to formulate, communicate, the ones who want to say something” (see above). Adamson begins by asserting that Chihuly’s art can be described as anti-intellectual (Adamson 2007, p. 65). Adamson says that some of Chihuly’s supporters have claimed that with his art he joins a tradition in glass art that has Venetian Renaissance glass and the French glass artist René Lalique as some of its clearest role models. Adamson writes: “Chihuly’s work shares in the raw, sensual appeal of this tradition, as well as its preening fetishization of technique for its own sake.” (Adamson 2007, p. 66). Adamson goes on to describe how the artistic practice of Chihuly and the craft people who follow in his footsteps can be characterised. Through their practices, they are “indulging in a free, gleefully empty-headed play of forms” (Adamson 2007, p. 66). He further develops this argument: “Chihuly and his followers, who are for many people the public face of contemporary craft, stand against everything that modern and postmodern art has tried to achieve” (Adamson 2007, p. 66). Finally, Adamson asserts that Chihuly displays a “cynical disregard for art’s critical possibilities” (Adamson 2007, p. 66).

What is interesting about Adamson’s example of bad craft is how the great line of conflict is drawn through it. There is one type of craft – more specifically the one practised by Chihuly and his followers – which stands against everything that modern and postmodern art has fought for. This is an anti-intellectual and hedonistic type of craft (Adamson 2007, p. 66). It is characterised by an interest in the craft itself, which in this context is considered problematic. Nor is it possible to find any acceptable content in it; instead, the craft involves a gleeeful and foolish playing with form. The idea of form without content appears to be a recurring theme of the influential craft theorists. This type of craft is also one which, according to Adamson, lacks all kind of self-reflection (Adamson 2007, p. 66). Nor is it critical. In Chihuly’s case, the craft is also commercially burdened. Adamson argues that
this type of craft erodes craft's cultural capital and threatens to nullify all possibilities for craft to be taken seriously.

Adamson's criticism hits home. Early in my career I became aware of Dale Chihuly's glass art and it made an impression on me. In my view, Chihuly is able in his best moments to give his art a content that makes an impact. His art has an ability to evoke wonder and move the viewer on a physical plane. It may be true that both Chihuly's art and my experience of it could be described as anti-intellectual, even though in this context I find that to be a problematic concept. Moreover, purely technically, from a craft perspective, he is impressive. In an intelligent way he has shown with his monumental works that it is possible to go beyond the format limitations which I, and many others, thought applied to blown glass. Clearly my way of understanding and encountering Chihuly's art differs from Adamson's way of understanding and encountering it. Personally, with my artistic approach I once again end up on the wrong side of the line which Adamson and Ernkvist draw between valid and invalid craft.

One thing that is clear with Adamson and Ernkvist is that contemporary art functions as the corrective to inadequate craft. The former is the necessary role model for craft people who want to keep up with the times and be taken seriously. Perhaps slightly surprisingly, Adamson exhibits an approach characterised by virtue and ethics, in that he perceives an ideal in modern and post-modern art which can be betrayed. In order to better understand the link both of these theorists make between craft and contemporary art, it is reasonable to review how the concept of contemporary art was formed.

CONTEMPORARY ART AS A ROLE MODEL

The ideas about form without content and craft that does not communicate can be traced back to changes the concept of visual art underwent during the 20th century. These changes were radical and led to a fundamentally changed concept of art.
Up until the Renaissance, no major distinction was made between visual art and other types of artistic craft. Then, however, the craft people of visual art distanced themselves from other craft people whose works had an aesthetic element. With the aim of raising the status of visual art, a number of art academies were established throughout Europe. First on the scene was the Accademia di San Luca, also called Accademia del Disegna, in Florence, founded in 1562. It was soon followed by others. One of the tasks which these academies took on, in addition to being responsible for training future artists, was to establish norms for what was exemplary art. Through the work of the academies, the reputation and status of visual art increased over time. Initially it was classical art that was the academies' ideal. The art of classical antiquity was considered to be unsurpassable. The historian of ideas Sven-Eric Liedman describes this view: “As long as classicism ruled, the ideal of art was regarded as timeless and therefore it was also impossible to surpass, in a process of progress, the eternal values associated with classical art” (Liedman 1999, pp. 371–373). Artists should live up to the standard of ideal art to the best of their ability. In such a paradigm, art tends to be relatively static. This way of regarding classical art resembles that found in the field of craft. A practitioner can hope to live up to a pre-set standard, but scarcely to surpass it.

Romanticism brought with it a different way of looking at art and especially at the artist. Romantic artists were expected to be original and personally innovative. Via personal originality, an artist could achieve the status of a genius. Even though Romanticism can be seen as a reaction against the Enlightenment and scientific rationality, its new ideal of the artist led to visual art also being encompassed by the Enlightenment’s idea of progress. In contrast to classical artists, the new artists of the Romantic era were expected to surpass those of previous generations. “The battle between the approved institutions [the academies] and the self-appointed representatives of a necessary process of change and progress was notorious in the development of modernity and was repeated over and over, at least since the breakthrough of Romanticism” (Liedman 1999, p. 373). Ever since then, personal innovation has been a self-evident part of the definition of art. The idea of the
artist as personally innovative is one of the linchpins of the modern concept of art.

As with most other fields, technological development has also exercised a strong influence over art. In terms of visual art, technological advances in photography and film are perhaps the most obvious examples of this relationship (see Benjamin 1997). Technological development plays a self-evident role in the shaping of a new concept of art.

Perhaps even more important, however, was the altered world view that was born in Europe during the 17th century. At that time, due to historical circumstances, the field of philosophy moved towards an ever more analytical and theoretical way of encountering the world (Toulmin 1992; Josefsson 1991, pp. 83–100). The Norwegian philosopher Hans Sjervheim describes this shift graphically: "It is said, and rightly so, that modern philosophy began with Descartes. One can say that what Descartes did was to deal the cards that we have been playing with most of the time ever since" (Sjervheim quoted in Lindseth 2016a).

The mechanical view of the world took shape. By being observed, the world could be objectively explained and described. Knowing and being became separated and the world ceased to be a place which, first and foremost, is understood via one's own participation in it. The man of science – it was usually a man (see Josefsson 1991, pp. 83–92) – and the scientific perspective were now accorded interpretive precedence when the world was to be described, categorised and, not least, tamed. This shift in Western thought resulted in the scientific gaze targeting more and more fields, including that of visual art.

Due to its academic weight, when art history was established in the 19th century as an independent scientific field, it came to be of decisive importance to art and to the formation of a modern concept of art. Art history seeks to explain what art is. As part of that purpose, art definitions, categories and boundaries between art and not-art are created. Good and bad art are identified. When art became the subject of this theoretical interest, category-defining boundaries became of great interest to the people whose practices became the subject of categorisation. The 20th century
was a very busy time for both art history theorists and art workers. Many boundaries have existed for artists to challenge and break. And many cases of the latter have existed for the theorists to deal with philosophically and theoretically. If, with the breakthrough of Romanticism, ideas about the personal and the original had become more important, then in the 20th century the closely related concept of boundary breaking became a badge of honour in art, and something which defines art that is interesting. Boundary breaking became a badge of quality. To be near the boundaries, at the forefront as part of an avant-garde, becomes desirable for everyone who wants to distinguish themselves in art.

In this way, new definitions of art are continually being created with ever greater speed. The boundary-breaking artists become very important to the art theorists who want to be relevant and vice versa, and an obvious career path opens up for the field’s actors who desire success and fame. From this perspective, the art that does not exist near the boundaries of art, and the theory that does not indicate the way forward, become less interesting. However, they are important as a reference point when new boundaries are identified and exceeded.

Like a boundary-breaking work of visual art, a boundary-breaking work of craft needs an antitype to relate to. In this antitype, the things that are considered to be a deficiency will be identified, whereas the opposite is true for the art that is considered to break with its predecessors. This phenomenon is described in the following comment: “The field that opens up after the possible dissolution of modernism is itself dependent for its composition on what type of modernism it is believed to break with, and the narrative about the predecessors’ deficiencies always becomes an integrated part of one’s own self-justification” (Wallenstein 1996, p. 119). This comment by the art theorist and professor of philosophy Sven-Olov Wallenstein refers to breaks with modernism’s various movements. Wallenstein speaks about the possible dissolution of modern art, because, paradoxically enough, even the art movements (such as post-modernism and contemporary art) that are considered to follow on from and succeed modernism have themselves adopted the same concept of linear development that characterises modernism.
As boundary breaking began being regarded as an artistic quality in and of itself, art became increasingly inward looking and self-absorbed. The meta-level—art which is about art—took up more and more room. There exist art movements that have made the meta-level the essence of their art. In such a movement, the condition for the art to be considered art is that it leads to a reshaping of the concept of art. The American artist Joseph Kosuth, one of the luminaries of conceptual art, writes: “The validity of artistic propositions is not dependent on any empirical, much less any aesthetic, presupposition about the nature of things. [...] In other words, the propositions of art are not factual, but linguistic in character—that is, they do not describe the behaviour of physical, or even mental objects; they express definitions of art, or the formal consequences of definitions of art” (Kosuth quoted in Wallenstein 1996, p. 146).

CONCEPTUAL ART

In this context, conceptual art is extremely interesting. In it, the views about “empty form” are the most obvious. In the conceptual art of the 1960s, art’s visual and tactile qualities were regarded with great suspicion. I will therefore explore this topic in greater depth, using an example from the American philosopher Benjamin Tilghman taken from his book But is it Art?: The Value of Art and the Temptation of Theory (Tilghman 1994). Starting from the many 20th century attempts to formulate comprehensive theories of visual art, Tilghman, with the support of Wittgenstein’s later ideas, seeks to sort out a series of linguistic and philosophical misunderstandings which he believes have coloured attempts to formulate this type of theory. The book is some three decades old, which means that the discussion in it would probably be different today. But the text is still relevant in a craft context, as craft is currently undergoing a transformation which in broad strokes can be seen as a carbon copy of the changes that occurred in visual art during the 20th century.

And now to an example: A man is standing in front of the artwork Placid Civic Monument by Claes Oldenburg. A hole has been dug in a
park and then filled in again (Tilghman 1994, p. 79). The man likes art. He has kept up with modernism and can appreciate both abstract painting and sculpture. But faced with this work, he wonders: Is it art? How should he understand it? He is confused. His previous experiences of art are of no help to him. Tilghman wants to help the man understand, whilst simultaneously trying to unravel the concepts himself. In his attempts, institutional art theory emerges as a factor (Tilghman 1994, pp. 47–70). This is attributed to George Dickie but is inspired by Arthur Danto’s ideas that art is dependent on an art world, and, above all, on the art theorists who populate that world (cf page 75). It is thus not the intrinsic characteristics of art’s artefacts which determine the extent to which something can be considered as art or not. It is the art expertise which has the power to decide what is or is not art. Art is whatever is presented as art within the art scene and can be appreciated as art by the art world. According to Tilghman, the word appreciated should be understood here as aesthetic appreciation. This aesthetic is defined by a traditional understanding of the concept: composition, balance, colour, form etc. Following this reasoning, the institutional art theory becomes inapplicable when what is being judged lacks these aesthetic qualities. If these qualities are absent, it is, quite simply, not art. Tilghman argues that Oldenburg’s imaginary hole lacks aesthetic qualities. He says there is a lack of logic in conceptual art, to which Oldenburg’s work belongs. He refers to a slogan used in conceptual art in the 1970s: “dematerialization’ of the art object and the ‘deaesthetization’ of art” (Tilghman 1994, p. 81).

Tilghman appears to be perplexed by the ideas presented in this slogan. It is hard to imagine art without an aesthetic element. Art without an artefact can also be hard to imagine. This slogan expresses a notion about such art.

According to institutional art theory, theorists and artists live in symbiosis with each other. Marcel Duchamp can be described as the groundbreaker who foresaw and initiated this development with his work Fountain. In art theory discussions today he is impossible to disregard. He and his art exemplify boundary-breaking art. Oldenburg’s imaginary hole possesses its great quality seen from this perspective of art-interested-in-its-own-boundaries. From such
a perspective, we can say that Oldenburg’s hole does indeed relate to art’s classical aesthetic normative system, in which the artefact and its design hold a central place. Placid Civic Monument denies this normative system and thereby breaks a boundary. Without the normative system, there would be no boundary to break. Thus, even though this relationship could be described as parasitic, the aesthetic as it is traditionally understood is still the prerequisite for the hole.

One thing that Tilghman holds against the hole and much of the rest of conceptual art is that he feels the artist’s intention is lacking (Tilghman 1994, pp. 85–92). No artistic intention, no art. He argues that an intention requires realisation and that without artistic realisation it is impossible to claim there is an artistic intention. Within conceptual art, it has been argued that the concept alone is enough – it does not need to be realised. Tilghman says this is dishonest. I would argue that the intention does exist and so does the realisation which Tilghman justifiably feels is necessary in order for the intention to be perceived. Even though it is somewhat irritat- ingly and possibly dishonestly disguised, the realisation is there. By arranging for his hole to be dug and then filled in, Oldenburg has actually tangibly realised his work. But so, too, have artists whose works have only been realised in speech or in writing.

In conceptual art, the idea is thus cultivated of art that is liberated from the material and the aesthetic. Content is created and can be conveyed alongside, or even without, a materialised artefact. Referring to Lucy Lippard and her book, which is so important to conceptual art, Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972: a cross-reference book of information on some esthetic boundaries: consisting of a bibliography into which are inserted a fragmented text, art works, documents, interviews, and symposia, Wallenstein describes the process that was initiated with the birth of conceptual art: “If we value this process negatively, we could speak of a language imperialism, the discursive’s overcoding of the visual” (Wallenstein 1996, p. 141). Wallenstein himself does not believe such a formulation is preferable. Instead, he feels that this shift can be described as “a consequence of previous developments in process art, happenings and body art” (Wallenstein 1996, p. 141).
Of course, immaterial art, or art liberated from the material, is not immaterial or liberated from the material at all, provided that we do not consider the possibility of divine or other such immaterial methods of conveyance. What is meant by the immaterial and art “liberated” from the material is that its main content is supported conceptually. Its main materials are speech and above all writing. When it materialises itself onto the contemporary globalised art scene, it not infrequently does so in English. What has happened, when art liberated itself from the material, is that art’s academically inspired concept crafting came to dominate instead of all the previous craft practitioners and materials via which visual art had materialised itself. In general, the materiality of text can be said to be the one that sits enthroned at the pinnacle of the language hierarchy. This situation has begun to apply to an ever greater degree in visual art and craft as well. When contemporary art – as I write this in 2016 – is described on the website of the Swedish government agency Public Art Agency Sweden as follows: “It [contemporary art] has like no other art form liberated itself from the material” (Malm 2016), it is a (possibly unconsidered) expression of the view that text and the conceptual are superior to all other artistic forms of expression and materialities. To describe the superiority of textual conceptuality as liberation is problematic. This is despite the fact that this is exactly how discursive languageness’s ever greater dominance has often been described within – in terms of theory – the most influential parts of the visual art and craft fields. Based on that fact, it seems reasonable to stick to the idea that this stance can be described as precisely the type of language imperialism that it actually is.

Back to the hole. To me it is obvious that Oldenburg has an intention with his work. Clearly, it addresses that audience which is interested in art theory. It is aimed at the art world’s expertise, which includes art theorists. Basically all art that is “immaterial” and “non-realised” – or, to put it more accurately – works that are primarily realised in words – addresses an audience interested in art theory. It is an art for those who are already initiated.

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, conceptual art also creates its own aesthetic system of rules. This aesthetic also exists in the
concept crafting process, and is of a philosophical and literary nature. The imaginary hole is elegant, simple and clear. From an art theory perspective, it is a beautiful example of successful boundary breaking, one that is rewarding for theory practitioners to theorise, philosophise and discuss. Like Duchamp's Fountain, the hole is an example of adroit concept crafting. Even though, as expressed in the quote above, Joseph Kosuth opposes all ideas that aesthetic has to do with real art, he himself is participating in creating an aesthetic style via his conceptual art practice. Conceptual art quickly became one art style among all the others. This can also be illustrated by the fact that, almost 50 years after Duchamp's Fountain, Andy Warhol successfully repeated Duchamp’s ready-made concept with his own work Brillo Boxes. Despite the years that had passed, Fountain was still considered to be fresh and boundary breaking in the 1960s. And now, 100 years after Duchamp’s introduction of the ready-made, it still retains some of its boundary-breaking aura. One clear example of this is the craft field’s great interest in the ready-made today.

ART AND THE MARKET – ON CREATIVE DESTRUCTION

However liberated it may be said to be, art has always had to relate to the economic system within which it exists. Traditional material- and artefact-based art is not infrequently criticised for its adaptability in relation to the capitalist economic system under which we currently live. This type of art easily becomes just one type of product among other products in a market. This criticism is justified. But even “immaterial”, conceptual and boundary-breaking art can be criticised for its adaptability to the economic system under which we live.

The concept of “creative destruction”, which was coined by the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter, describes a type of destructiveness that is necessary to create room for growth and new products in a market: “This creative process of destruction is the core of capitalism” (Schumpeter 2008, p. 107). However, this concept is not only appropriate for describing the relationship
between the capitalist market’s destructive and creative forces. Creative destruction is also a suitable concept for describing a type of art that has made boundary breaking a norm. In both these systems, creative destruction can be understood as a phenomenon that consumes existing meaning in order to provide fuel for the engine that drives the system by replacing an old meaning with a new one. Only a decade ago it was hard to imagine that the lack of a functioning smartphone could be experienced as a deficiency and create feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness.

A previous meaning existed which was independent of smartphones and has been lost. Alongside the destruction of meaning driven by technology and the economy, in art there is also one driven by language. The traditional material-based forms of expression in art, those that do not qualify as boundary breaking, have come to define the boundaries that are broken by boundary-breaking art. I have previously shown how, in order to create its own context of meaning, boundary-breaking art must adopt an antagonistic relationship to the art that preceded it. In this way, the meaning of the previous art is eroded. When, via creative destruction, that meaning can more or less be perceived as depleted, the result is a craft that begins to be viewed as contentless or a type of painting that can be declared dead. One clear example of this phenomenon is found in a review of the artist Susanna Slöör’s paintings in the online magazine Omkonst (Brodow-Inzaina 2012). There the reviewer and art critic Anna Brodow Inzaina wonders whether Slöör’s paintings can be considered to be good art because they can be described as being good painting. Brodow Inzaina answers her own question: “As painting, the exhibition is good. As a means of expression for critical contemporary art, Slöör’s painterly language is insufficient because it lacks references to a contemporary political and social reality.” According to a contemporary perception of what art is, Slöör’s paintings thus cannot qualify as art.

Both in the economic world and in the art world, capital is at stake. But art’s creative destruction is more about the accumulation of cultural rather than monetary capital. Cultural capital, however, can be cashed in and become monetary, when grants and
academic jobs are to be distributed among the field’s actors. No art, however immaterial it may be, seems to be able to walk away from economic reality.

THE CONCEPT OF CRAFT

After having examined the concept of art, it is now time to look more closely at the concept of craft. In doing so, I would mainly like to highlight some important conceptual differences between art and craft.

In comparison to the concept of art, the concept of craft is new. The craft practitioners who are classified as craft today did not come under the shared heading of “craft” before the mid-19th century, when the concept emerged for the first time (Veiteberg 2005, p. 16).

During the 19th century, in conjunction with the creation of nation states, interest was focused on everything that could create a sense of shared national identity. The everyday handicrafts which the agrarian population had always practised then became of interest. They were perceived to capture something genuine and timeless, something linked to the spirit of the people. Handicrafts and craft could be used to create perceptions about national identity. This explanatory model may be more appropriate for explaining the emergence of handicrafts rather than that of craft but drawing precise boundaries between these two fields is not easy. There is another, related, explanatory model which perhaps more clearly explains the emergence of the concept of craft. There was a desire at that time to safeguard the good taste which the educated middle class believed it possessed. Good taste was threatened by industrial production which, in addition to being accessible to the lower social classes, was also believed to parody and trivialise the good taste of the bourgeoisie. It was under this

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Translator's note: the Swedish word "konsthandverk" (literally: "art craft") used throughout this dissertation is almost always translated as "craft" today but it can also be translated in a more historical context as "the applied arts" or "the decorative arts", in contrast with traditional folk handicrafts ("slöjd"). In this section of the text, "craft" is used in the sense of "the applied/decorative arts".

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conceptual sway that many of the influential museums in this field were established throughout Europe during the 19th century. These historical roots of craft are problematic and have been subject to criticism (Veiteberg 2005, p. 17, Zetterlund 2015, pp. 10–14, Adamson 2010, pp. 135–136). From a practitioner’s perspective, it is possible to claim that this ideological baggage does not have its source in the practices of craft and handicraft people. It is more the case that, partly for political reasons, these practices came to be appropriated by a power-bearing elite.

Another way to explain the emergence of a concept of craft lies closer to the interests which can be presumed to have belonged to the practitioners themselves. According to this view, the emergence of craft can be explained against the background of the industrial revolution. From this perspective, craft can be viewed as a reaction to both industrialisation and to the project of modernism of which it was a part. Craft became an act of resistance against the power-bearing social classes. The resistors were people who did not readily accept modernism’s optimism about progress, that is, those people who were not persuaded that scientific rationalism and economic efficiency (read: capitalism) would automatically lead to a brighter future. Those parts of the population, including children, who were compelled to become physically acquainted, on factory floors, with the dawning industrialism presumably found it difficult to fully share the modernist optimism about the future.

Industrialisation threatened the craft-based production systems and also demanded the disciplining of the work force. This led to friction, of which Britain’s legendary Luddite movement was one example. Workers with a background in farming and craft had a view of work and its meaning which was not compatible with industrialisation’s view of those things. Preindustrial people regarded leisure time as something valuable. After the basic human needs for food, clothing, heat and a roof over one’s head had been met, there was no particular reason to continue working for its own sake. Therefore early industrial workers also regarded work for work’s sake as a foreign concept. Keeping to a timetable and being willing to subordinate their lives to industry’s needs, with long
workdays, monotony and never ending production, clashed with the preindustrial view of work (Paulsen 2010, pp. 34–45).

The inhuman working conditions which many early industrial workers were finally forced to accept were noticed and criticised by many people at that time. They included the British social critics John Ruskin and William Morris. The two men were extremely important to craft people’s self-understanding. One of the pioneering figures in the Arts and Crafts movement, Morris was a very versatile man who was an artist, craft person and author. He was also an important figure in Britain’s early socialist movement. Morris dreamed of an egalitarian society where the economic elite who controlled the production and stipulated its conditions were replaced by an equal and democratic system steered by people’s common interests and needs, a system that was able to address the issue of what was meaningful work from the perspective of both the worker and society. In such a system, work could be tailored to human needs and thereby could also be experienced by the individual worker as enjoyable and meaningful (Morris 2010). To Morris and Ruskin, it felt natural to look at how work had been organised before the rise of industrialisation. They found role models in the mediaeval guild system, within which many of the crafts of the day had been organised. Here they found their ideal: autonomous craft people who had power over their own time and their own means of production, and who could thereby influence the work’s organisation and result. These thinkers combined reactionary and progressive views in an interesting way, and their ideas about work and its meaning can today be said to be part of craft’s DNA. The craft person thus embodies a criticism of civilisation and stands in opposition to a modernity which has shown itself to be indifferent to values that cannot be defended on economic or scientific grounds. This ideological foundation was provocative right from the start. In his day, Karl Marx described it with irritation as “craft idiocy” (Paulsen 2010, p. 57).

When these roots of craft become visible today, they are not infrequently labelled as hippie-like and romantic utopianism. This mindset, with its roots going back to Ruskin and Morris, is also the one which Adamson describes as the mental illness suffered
by craft as a field. In my view, the pillow room metaphor is also partly to do with this legacy. The ideological foundation of craft also clashes with the considerably more modern optimism about progress upon which the contemporary concept of art rests.

A WORLD VIEW

In this discussion I have focused on the influential faction of contemporary theory practice and shown that within it there appears to be a shared opinion about a direction in which craft should move. Therefore there also exists an opinion about which path leads forward. In order to be able to orientate oneself and choose a direction that leads forward, one must have an opinion about and a view of the world. Is it possible to say anything about the world view of contemporary craft theory practice? I will make an attempt.

It would be reasonable to describe this world view as social constructionist. I will explore this idea. The social-constructivist movement can be understood as a reaction against the scientific, supposedly objective, and positivist-based world view with which modernity is often associated. As a movement, social constructivism must be described as quite sprawling. The label embraces a conglomerate of different directions and branches. Schools of thought such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, critical theory and hermeneutics have to varying degrees been associated with social constructivism. All these lines of thought share the idea that reality is wholly or partly socially constructed (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2008, pp. 81–82). The social-constructivist thought system also includes the idea that this construction can be improved – that there is an emancipatory potential to be released. By exposing and deconstructing assumed truths and norms, it is possible to liberate the individual from restrictive ideas and thereby unnecessary suffering. All the various schools of thought which can be gathered under the social-constructivist umbrella also share to varying degrees the hope of this possibility. This emancipatory ambition is easy to sympathise with.
In a socially constructed world, language is given a prominent position. Within social constructivism, (verbal) language is generally considered to be of great importance to our perception of reality. In some schools of thought this view is totally dominant. In these most radical schools of thought, society and knowledge not only become social and linguistic constructions, but so does the reality to which the knowledge relates. All knowledge and all claims to truth thereby become temporary and relative (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2008, p. 100). The idea that there are no eternal truths, or any essence, paradoxically also encompasses the eternal truth – or essence – that there is no eternal truth. Indeed, there is also a criticism of the social-constructivist schools of thought which take these ideas farthest. Such a criticism can be expressed as follows: The ground is hard when you fall on it and the fire is hot when you put your hand in it. The fire and the ground are not human constructions and cannot be deconstructed with verbal tools in order to thereby liberate us from the suffering which the ground or the fire can cause us (see Ferraris 2014).

Despite its somewhat ironic tone, this statement captures something important. For a craft person, it is difficult to embrace the idea that reality only manifests in and via social and linguistic interaction. As a craft person, one is forced to actively participate in the world via one’s senses and body. A sensual relationship to the world and embodied knowledge are prerequisites for practising a craft. Through this practice, it becomes clear that there are parts of the world that are not constituted via verbal language. That said, it is still equally obvious that much of what we perceive to be reality is indeed socially constructed.

When the late Bruno Latour, who is considered to be one of social constructivism’s more influential figures, writes the following, it is possible to glimpse a certain degree of scepticism about an excessively linguistically founded approach to reality: “What is the use of poking holes in delusions, if nothing more true is revealed beneath?” (Latour 2010, p. 475). The quotation comes from the article “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’”, in which Latour considers how the future can be met in a more constructivist way.
than what modernity – with its almost blind trust in the rationality of scientific reason – has been able to do so far. But there is also a criticism, which the quotation shows, of an excessive trust in the potential of deconstruction. Latour goes on to give some support to the ideas that can be born from a craft person’s experience: “We need to have a much more material, much more mundane, much more immanent, much more realistic, much more embodied definition of the material world if we wish to compose a common world” (Latour 2010, p. 484).

I would assert that the world view of the influential segment of contemporary craft theory practice rests heavily on the opinion that the world is (verbally) linguistically constructed and that the path ahead involves using linguistic means to deconstruct it. It is a world view in which ideas about materiality as emptiness, and immateriality (= verbal languageness) as content, acquire a meaning. Within this ideological framework, the discursive element associated with craft becomes the primary issue and craft’s artefacts become a side issue. Or, as Peter Dormer chose to describe it: “Conceptual craft exist primarily in words, with the objects acting as symbols or pegs” (Dormer 2010, p. 228).

In the ideology within whose framework this theory is produced, there is also a clear belief that artists should adopt a critical approach when constructing the conceptual content of their art. In the previously discussed example of the glass artist Dale Chihuly, Adamson argued that Chihuly’s glass art displays a “cynical disregard for art’s critical possibilities”. The artist and the art should be critical. This also becomes logical given theory practice’s closeness to social-constructionist schools of thought.

This closeness is sometimes literally expressed very clearly. The Swedish Research Council’s Artistic Research Yearbook (2015) describes two lines of thought within artistic research into the topic of craft in Sweden. One is described as a line of thought “where personal artistic practice comprises the starting point for the study” (Lind 2015, p. 172). This description does not give any clear clues about its ideological framework. The approach can basically be applied to all artistic research. For the other line of thought, the ideological framework is more obvious. It “uses
craft as a method or platform for explorations of society’s norms and values” (Lind 2015, p. 172). Almost identical wording can be found in Konsthantverk i Sverige del 1 (Craft in Sweden part 1): “It [the craft] is a platform for exploring society” (Zetterlund & Hyltén-Cavallius & Rosenqvist 2015, p. 5) and “[a]t its best, craft today is a material method of exploration which examines its own history, its institutional framework, and the history of other material cultures” (Zetterlund 2015, p. 16). On its website, Konstfack describes its Master’s programme CRAFT! as follows: “The Master’s programme is a collaboration between Ceramics & Glass, Textiles and Ädellab; together we regard craft as a relevant method for questioning and challenging.” (Konstfack’s website, 2016). In all these cases, craft is regarded as a method (or platform) for examining, questioning or challenging social norms. It is a reasonable assumption that all these examples involve a desire to expose and highlight norms and values that deserve to be criticised. It is very clear that craft is perceived here to be a method for exercising criticism in a social-constructivist spirit. Within this ideological framework, craft acquires its importance and legitimacy based on its ability to generate such criticism.

SUMMARY

Before I offer constructive suggestions for a way forward with regard to the criticism which has been expressed here, I would like to briefly summarise the main points of my criticism.

I have spoken about a language imperialism within visual art and craft, whereby craft that is conceptually and discursively focused, with the willing assistance of theory practice, ends up at the top of the art food chain. It is this discursive art, which is often labelled as conceptual or immaterial art, which most easily qualifies as boundary-breaking and/or innovative art. It is this type of art which, according to the prevailing norms, is considered to be the correct and desirable art. Boundary-breaking art is unilaterally dependent on and has an antagonistic relationship to the art that is described as non-boundary breaking.
This linguistic hierarchical system within art is mirrored and reinforced by social processes and mechanisms. In the case of art and craft, this is perhaps most clearly noticeable within the educational system, but the present economic system can also be used as an explanatory model of why art which is considered to be boundary breaking is favoured.

The above criticism refers mainly to the issue of the normative view of art’s various linguistic materialities. There is one more dimension, which is about which themes and content art and craft should have. There exist ideas that certain materialities cannot convey relevant content. The materialities that are not considered able to carry relevant linguistic content are referred to as “empty form” or “just form”. Empty form refers to the materialities whose content is often “beyond conceptual”. In contrast to this “empty form” is conceptual art. It is conceptual craft or conceptual art that is able to convey relevant messages. According to the influential theory, relevant content in today’s craft should pose questions about and critically examine craft’s own history and/or general social norms.

I want to stress that I sympathise with the emancipatory ambition which exists within the ideology that forms the basis of contemporary craft theory. But I am critical of the fact that craft is instrumentalised and becomes a platform or method via which norm critique can be formulated. Even though this purpose can be said to be a good one, I would argue that it drastically restricts what craft can be. Craft is a linguistic possibility that can be used to express anything and everything (including norm critique).

Craft’s theory production is supported and sanctioned by heavyweight social institutions such as academia and museums. These institutions possess authority. Theory practice thereby done occurs from a position of power. To state in advance, from such a position, that one kind of artistic content is more valid or relevant than another is problematic, not least from a democratic viewpoint.

It appears obvious that the influential faction of contemporary theory practice has difficulty in adopting a self-critical perspective in relation to the language-imperialistic structure of which it is a part. This structure has a negative effect on the linguistic
diversity of art and craft. On this point, theory practice appears to uncritically uphold the prevailing system instead of self-critically questioning it.

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

I would now like to offer suggestions for how craft’s theory practice could be developed and come out of the linguistic counter-productiveness which it, perhaps partly unwittingly, has signed up for.

The discussion about artistic quality is, of course, a very important one, in which theory practice has a given role. However, to do what theory practice tends to do – to rank various artistic languagenesses and to describe one as being more valid than another – is destructive, at least from the perspective of a desire for linguistic diversity and artistic freedom.

Throughout this dissertation I have argued in favour of the concept of clay-based languageness and asserted that a distinct linguistic quality is associated with it. With its help, it is possible to express things that are scarcely possible to express in another way. In my view, all artistic practices should fundamentally be understood as linguistic ones, all with their own unique qualities and possibilities. Art is significant. People are affected by and express themselves through art. The linguistic space which art opens up makes life richer in nuances, creates new perspectives, and creates room for reflection. If art has a purpose, it is as a linguistic possibility. The good thing about languages and languagenesses is that under the right conditions, they can be enduringly innovative. The meaning which a language can create never ends. Language also tends to become richer the more it is used. Unlike economic growth, the growth of language does not depend on any destructive creativity. From a language perspective, there is no end to the possibilities of innovative forms of expression. Humans’ linguistic creativity is an endless resource. And they have exploited that resource over the millennia without the artistic practices that were then in use becoming exhausted or losing their ability to create new meaning.
I believe it would be fruitful to abandon the modernist linear mindset whereby boundary-breaking art is unthinkingly believed to be the most interesting and relevant type of art. This kind of linear thinking has a destructive influence on artistic diversity and multiplicity of voices. If we instead begin seeing craft (and art) as the linguistic possibility it actually is, that would open the doors to a constructive critical consideration of all the linguistic forms of expression which the field encompasses. The qualitative judgements could then be made based on each languageness’s own circumstances. Successful and less successful art exists in all genres and materialities.

I find contemporary society’s doubt about art’s ability to communicate and create meaning fascinating but also regrettable. Regrettable, because the doubt is self-fulfilling. To some extent it is able to erode the meaning within the linguistic practices that are starting to become seen as exhausted.
Chapter 6

A reflection on methodology
PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

My own practical knowledge and experience are at the centre of my research. Practical knowledge is now an established research field within the Scandinavian university world and with my research I thereby follow a path that has, to some extent, already been trodden.

In Sweden Bo Göranzon, Professor Emeritus of Skill and Technology, was an early pioneer in this field. With his work he can be said to have laid a foundation for growth, around the concept of practical knowledge, of what is now an independent academic field. In the 1970s he became interested in the frictions that arose when the computerisation of work life encountered already-established job skills. Over time this interest led to the establishment by KTH Royal Institute of Technology of the new research field of Skill and Technology. In the mid-80s, at Göranzon’s initiative, a collaboration was initiated between the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm and KTH. Under the heading of “Dialogue Seminars”, participants sought to explore without preconditions how professional skills and/or what is sometimes called “silent knowledge” could be described and understood. The Dialogue Seminars were a place where various occupational groups could compare and reflect on their practical and professional skills and experiences. Another significant individual in this field is Ingela Josefson, currently professor at the Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts. In 2000 the Centre for Studies in Practical Knowledge was established under her leadership at Södertörn University. The Centre currently offers programmes at the Master’s level. In Norway, the philosophical sector of the academic world, led by such figures as Tore Nordenstam and Jakob Meløe, was already very interested in issues concerning practical knowledge. In 1997 the Centre for Practical Knowledge was established at Bodø University College [now Nord University – translator’s note], which has had the authority to grant doctoral degrees since 2006 (Praktisk kunnskap – som erfaring og som forskningsfelt, 2005).
What exactly is practical knowledge? The answer is not self-evident. I will revisit ancient Greece to see how philosophers there tried to clarify issues concerning the forms and essence of this knowledge. Plato was among the first to use some form of systematic approach to explore forms of knowledge. His student, Aristotle, then developed those lines of thought. In their texts they define various types of knowledge. “Techne” was the form of knowledge that enabled humans to participate in productive activity. Techne could be described as craft skill. Alongside techne there were also “theoria” and “praxis”. The former, theoria, is an observational type of knowledge. It is about perceiving connections and building an understanding of the contexts within which humans operate. For theoria, theoretical insight or “episteme” is required, that is, the ability to form logical conclusions. This knowledge must be provable, as in mathematics, for example. Praxis concerns the knowledge necessary in the interaction with other people. Praxis requires good judgement and wisdom, called “phronesis” in Greek. In addition to these forms of knowledge is the highest one, superior to the others: wisdom or “ sophia”. All these forms of knowledge rest on a common foundation (“arché”). The foundation of all knowledge is human common sense (“nous”). In ancient Greece knowledge was considered a virtue. It involved the ability to make the right use of the knowledge within the contexts to which it belonged (Lindseth 2016a, pp. 240–243).

Returning to practical knowledge, in my case it might be obvious to perceive it as purely a craft skill (techne). However, it must be understood as a combination of all the knowledge forms listed above. Practical knowledge fits well into an understanding of knowledge as a virtue, because it is a knowledge form which shows itself in action.

The classical view of knowledge whereby knowledge is primarily regarded as a virtue can be said to have dominated all the way through to the Scientific Revolution. There and then, perceptions of knowledge changed. The new way of regarding knowledge involves a shift in perspective. Whereas knowledge had previously been thought to manifest primarily in action, knowledge now becomes
something that arises from the world being observed. Within this new knowledge paradigm, the observer considers themselves to be objective and the observation is believed to occur from a neutral place that, so to speak, exists beyond or outside the world (see Chapter 5). The more recent perspective has pushed aside the previous one, even though both have really always been valid. The knowledge that arises from observations of the world can be labelled declarative knowledge. “The natural foundation for the development of theoretical knowledge, which is often a declarative knowledge, is familiarity knowledge. Declarative knowledge rests on a foundation of familiarity knowledge; without that knowledge there is no declarative knowledge” (Josefson 1991, p. 102). Declarative knowledge therefore does not exist independently of practical knowledge.

Plato’s ideas about theoria and episteme are relatively close to the modern concept of scientific knowledge. Knowledge understood as virtue is always relevant because, whatever specific type it might be, it sooner or later manifests in the world and should then be used responsibly and wisely.

These two types of knowledge are thus not really in opposition to each other but instead complement each other: “It is not a matter of two kinds of knowledge that can be interchanged with each other but rather two aspects of knowledge. As soon as we talk about knowledge, we can inquire whether that knowledge is good enough and what it is about. We thereby allow for a conceptual distinction, a conceptual divide between knowledge as situational and bodily anchored ability on the one hand and knowledge as justified assumption about a factual matter on the other hand.” (Lindseth 2016a, p. 249). However, despite this, the dominant belief today is that the most reliable and most relevant knowledge comes from the scientific and observational approach (Lindseth 2016a, pp. 250–255). The relatively new academic field of practical knowledge can be understood as a reaction against the shift in the perception of knowledge that emerged alongside the development of modernity. From a historical perspective, there were also other counter-movements against what is now the dominant view of knowledge. Two examples are Romanticism and phenomenology (Lindseth 2016a, p. 257, Liedman 1997, p. 458).
Anders Lindseth, who is Professor Emeritus at the Centre for Practical Knowledge, Nord University, has an alternative proposal for how knowledge – all knowledge – could be defined. He argues that knowledge can be regarded as the ability to respond (Lindseth 2016b). From this viewpoint, all knowledge can be perceived as responses to the challenges life poses to us humans. This viewpoint would make it possible to escape the dualistic way of regarding knowledge either as virtuous and practical or as verifiable and theoretical. Even that knowledge which is described as theoretical aims to give answers to the problems and issues that arise in life. The ability to respond does not have to immediately manifest as an answer. It can also manifest as an ability to pose relevant questions, as occurs in (virtuous) science. Answers can be sought with scientific methods or provided from (considered) experience. However, what defines all knowledge is that it gives us the ability to respond to the challenges life gives us. From this perspective, all knowledge ultimately becomes practical knowledge (Lindseth 2016a, pp. 259–263).

PRACTICAL METHODOLOGY

Based on my experience as a ceramist, the concept of knowledge as an ability to respond has a meaning that can encompass all aspects of my professional practice. How do I respond to craft’s artistic, linguistic, social and all other challenges I face as an art worker? To succeed as a ceramist I must be able to respond, whatever the issue is. The ability to respond is the focus of my research.

How can this ability be understood, described and become the object of critical reflection? How can this knowledge be developed and deepened?

Sometimes in life we get a feeling that something isn’t quite right. This is true not least in the life of an art worker. When I am shaping the clay it happens all the time. I notice that something doesn’t feel right and I try to fix it. The occupation is a reflective one. Through it, knowledge is developed so that the artistic process can be adapted and better meet the goals we set. Openness and responsiveness to the feeling that something isn’t right (or is right
to a surprising degree) is thus a prerequisite for the continual learning process that characterises the reflective practice. There is an everyday element to this and as a professional art worker I often do not notice it very much. Sometimes, though, the experience that something is not right takes on a different, non-everyday nature. Something bigger is at stake. Then it can often be hard to understand what that is and hard to place the experience in a context. Such events are often memorable. It is these types of experiences that are the starting points for the research being done in the field of practical knowledge. It is the stories from one’s own practice, stemming from these memories, which form the starting point for critical reflection about one’s own professional knowledge. A story has the ability to capture in a multi-dimensional and in-depth way things that can otherwise be difficult to convey. One indication of this relationship is the great importance of practice-based stories when craft skills are being transmitted from one generation of craft people to another (see Planke 2001).

The reflection on this type of experience can be said to occur in several stages. First the experience must be told. The very act of narrating the experience is in itself a form of reflection – the concrete or original one (Lindseth 2016b). Is the story accurate? Does it capture everything that needs to be included in order for the story to be accurate? Perhaps it needs to be reworked? When the story feels acceptable, the question can be asked: what is the story really about? Based on the answers generated by this next stage of reflection, we can then go on to make a critical reflection, or meta-reflection, and to link that to relevant external sources. Here, however, a risk arises: it is possible to lose the closeness to the story and to the original reflection:

“Critical reflection is meta-reflection. But critical reflection must also be in touch with feeling; it must look at the experience presented and ask what is essential and important here. We may well demonstrate that ‘culture, language, selective perception, subjective forms of cognition, social conventions, politics, ideology, power and narrative permeate’ the narrative in complex ways, and to the extent that this is the case, it is also extremely important to demonstrate this, but if we lose touch with the original reflection...
in the narrated experience, critical reflection becomes a form of naivety that prides itself on not being naive.\textsuperscript{26} (Lindseth 2016b).

Of course, there also exists a corresponding risk that the reflection becomes encased in excessive subjectivity. The personal must be balanced with the general. Like everywhere else in life, research in the field of practical knowledge also requires practical wisdom (phronesis).

**REFLECTION ON THE PATH**

The word “method” has Greek roots and is a combination of the words meta and hodos. Hodos can be translated as path or life path and method (meta-hodos) can then be understood as a reflection on the path we choose. Used here, it is a reflection about the path that led to the research presented here.

When I applied in 2010 to become a research student I stated in my application that I wanted to explore how the differences between visual art and craft could be understood and explained. I realised fairly soon, however, that the issue of the differences between the very close categories of visual art and craft really did not interest me very much. From the perspective of doing, the categories, and the differences between them, make no difference. In my practice, as in everyone else’s, the action or the doing is totally key, and it was in practice that my study had to begin. The original issue was not really related to my own practice; instead, it was primarily about the external structure that encompasses my practice. That structure is not unimportant but it is secondary in terms of what was happening between me and the clay in the workshop. What was interesting, and totally central for me, was the process that transformed clay into language. My perspective thus shifted and my original set of questions changed. Craft-based languageness became the central theme of my research.

\textsuperscript{26} The quote inside the above quote comes from Tolkning och reflektion (Alvesson, M. & Sköldberg, K., 2008 p. 14).

However, based on my interest in the practice itself and the expression itself, by extension it also became self-evident to consider how
the outside world regarded the various forms of linguistic expression that arose from the practice. My research therefore nevertheless largely came to focus on the differences between visual art and craft, even though that interest was not explicitly concerned with why two artefacts, outwardly confusingly like each other, could be sorted into different categories depending on through which filter the objects were being regarded. Instead, the research focuses on the influence exerted by the concept of visual art over the concept of craft, and the consequences of that influence on practice.

Initially, when I began my research, my academic experience was very limited and I was a bit concerned about how my encounter with the academic world would turn out. I also knew nothing about the relatively newly established field of practice-based research. I therefore also felt unsure of my own ability to produce something that could pass as such research. It turned out that I was not alone in my uncertainty. At the introductory course for doctoral students I attended, it turned out that many of my fellow students, just like me, were unsure about what practice-based research might really involve.

The course in question was advertised as a writing course. It was called “Writing and practical knowledge”. It was given at the Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts at the University of Gothenburg and was led by my main supervisor, Anders Lindseth. The course was given regularly and the idea was that it would hasten the process and help the doctoral students to get going faster with their research and with their written reflections about the research questions they had formulated. It worked for me. The course meant that I was immediately and concretely thrown into reflection about my own practice and the process of artistic creation. It was also here that my initial research question was reformulated and gained its new angle.

Within the course framework, and based on stories from our own practices as I described above, we produced texts, which were then considered and discussed jointly. The text I wrote at this introductory course is still extant as one of the key texts of this dissertation; it is the story about the mechanical model. The form of writing we practised at the course, with its direct and
close connection to our own artistic experiences, was an excellent seedbed, out of which could grow a general understanding of the complex form of knowledge that is art. It was important to be able to share one’s own practical experiences with practitioners from many other artistic fields in a situation that focused explicitly on jointly considering those experiences. In this context I would also like to mention the three-stage course in epistemology I took at the Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts under the guidance of Ingela Josefson and Tore Nordenstam. The structure of all these courses was similar, and although the introductory course was described as a writing course, its epistemological content was very substantial, and writing based on one’s own experiences was very substantial in the epistemological courses. The research presented here would not have been possible without the foundation that was laid during these courses. The joint reflections based on the texts we produced, plus the epistemological perspective that was opened up, turned out to be very useful for me in my ambition to better understand my own practice (and those of others) and to place it in a broader context.

The philosophical questions about how knowledge should be understood and evaluated, together with the question of what constitutes a language, were the keys I needed in order to conceptually access what I consider to be the core of craft practice. The apparently minor issue of craft’s languageness and the problems it encounters within the contemporary context leads onwards in a perhaps slightly surprising way and opens up very broad perspectives. We live in an age – which some people call the anthropocene – in which the view of knowledge is clearly involved in shaping our world view, and, perhaps even more clearly, and in the most concrete way, is involved in shaping the world. On several occasions in this dissertation I have touched on the serious set of problems which arises from how we regard and evaluate knowledge, and the way we relate to the world which stems from that viewpoint. Craft illuminates and highlights this very set of problems in an interesting way.

From a somewhat narrower perspective which focuses on the practice-based research within academia, I can perceive several
different development possibilities for the research presented here. As I have already mentioned, in my encounters with practitioners from other artistic fields, I found it very interesting to reflect on the similarities and differences that characterise our various practices. In this dissertation I explore in more depth the relationships between visual art and craft. I do so, perhaps not so much based on the differences between the practices within each field, as based on the historical and conceptual differences between the fields themselves. There are, of course, innumerable other fields and phenomena with which craft practice could be compared and thereby contribute to a greater understanding of the conditions of artistic creation.

The linguistic theme in this dissertation could also be further developed and deepened. Because every linguistic practice must be understood based on its own time and place, I believe it is reasonable and fruitful to continue in practice-based research, as I have done here, to explore and test the linguistic possibilities which art contains. Humans’ languageness has presumably always been the object of reflection and will presumably continue to be. It is an exploration that has no apparent end. Here, of course, I refer to both the practical and the theoretical exploration of art’s linguistic possibilities.

MY PLACE WITHIN PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

I am one of the first research students in the postgraduate field of craft in Sweden and we are now a total of four doctoral students. The group consists of Frida Hållander, who began her studies in 2010 at the same time as I did, plus Nicolas Cheng, who began his studies in 2015, and Emelie Röndahl, who will begin her studies in the autumn of 2016. In the spring of 2016 Birgitta Nordström gained her licentiate degree in the topic. The field I find myself in with my research is a very tiny and still unestablished one. Practice-based research is somewhat more established and has a slightly longer history. It took off around the beginning of the millennium, so it has now been going for just over 15 years. The research field I am
in is young in all ways and it has not been obvious how I should orientate myself or situate myself within this new field.

Now, though, a field is in the process of being established and I am following my colleagues’ work with interest. Frida Hållander’s project, *Vems hand är det som gör? – Orienteringar kring hantverk, klass och feminism* [Whose hand is doing the making? – Orientations around craft, class and feminism], can be described as norm critical, and craft is the platform from which that critique takes shape. In his research (with the working title *The Space of Craft and the Crafting of Spaces*), Nicolas Cheng is interested in the social contexts in which craft and the craft person find themselves. He is also interested in material hierarchies and beliefs about genuineness which can be linked to these hierarchies. Emelie Röndahl uses the rya rug weaving technique to explore the possibilities and limitations of the textile image. The projects are all very different, and, based on the research produced to date, I would say that Birgitta Nordström’s research is the one closest to my own. In her licentiate dissertation *I ritens rum – om mötet mellan tyg och människa* [In the ritual space – on the encounter between textiles and humans], and based on her own practice and experience, she writes about the role of textiles in relation to the rites with which we surround death. Our similarities are primarily methodological, in that we both have a closeness to the field of practical knowledge.

One of the advantages of being a practice-based doctoral student is all the resulting encounters with doctoral students from other artistic fields. These encounters have given me perspective on my own research. I have also been able to note that some of my colleagues’ research projects touch on the themes that I am working on. One such colleague is Thomas Laurien, who recently gained his degree in the research field of design. In his dissertation *Händelser på ytan – shibori som kunskapande rörelse* [Events on the surface – shibori as a knowledge-creating movement] (Laurien 2016), he singles out the academic field which collectively goes under the label of “affect theory”. He writes: “about affect as a defence against thinking which threatens and criticises our ability to experience and understand the world through wonder; and, not
least, about drawing attention to and questioning spoken language's hegemony over other languages, and how that is related to the senses of feeling, smell and taste, the sense of movement and rhythm, and the autonomous nervous system" (Laurien 2016, p. 227). That we have both—though from different perspectives—highlighted the problems which art’s beyond-conceptual forms of expression encounter in an ever more conceptual and verbal-language oriented world.

The interior designer and furniture designer Andreas Nobel is following a similar train of thought. He focuses on knowledge hierarchies, and his approach is close to my own. In his dissertation Dimmer på upplysningen – text, form och formgivning [Dimmer on the Enlightenment – text, form and design] (Nobel 2014), he considers how knowledge is valued. He says that knowledge which is not expressed through text in today’s society is encountering ever greater resistance, and that this is clearly visible in art’s now strongly academically focused educational system. The actor Ulf Friberg’s dissertation Den kapitalistiska skådespelaren – aktör eller leverantör? [The capitalist actor – actor or supplier?] (Friberg 2014) is another example of practice-based research which critically examines the structures that surround and create the conditions for the artistic practices contained within them.

Personally, I consider this critical possibility to be one of the most interesting aspects of practice-based research, and I can confirm that the research being done in the field of practical knowledge enables such critique in a very concrete way. That is because the research deepens our understanding of the professional conditions which govern every practice. The practitioner’s perceptions of their knowledge and its context of meaning are made visible, and it thereby becomes possible to critically consider the social frameworks within which the practical knowledge is implemented. Research in the practical knowledge field is characterised throughout by the desire to better understand and develop the researcher’s own professional practice.

There are some artistic practitioners among the graduates of the Centre for Practical Knowledge at Nord University. They include Maria Johansson, actor and now Professor of Practice-based
Research at the Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts. Her dissertation Skådespelarens praktiska kunskap [The actor’s practical knowledge] (Johansson 2012) illustrates the fact that our similarity of research method can make the similarities and differences within our respective artistic practices emerge from a comparison. Similarly, I find the visual artist Roland Ljungberg’s dissertation En resa från det ordlösa – en kartläggning av ett personligt yrkeskunnande [A journey from the wordless – a mapping of personal professional knowledge] (Ljungberg 2008), which also has a closeness to the field of practical knowledge, to be related to my own research. Ljungberg’s research, though, differs from mine in that he is interested more in the creative processes themselves and less in the surrounding structures which create the external circumstances for the practice.

Via the Network for Contemporary Nordic Ceramics I have come in contact with the ceramists Caroline Slotte and Kjell Rylander, who have both participated in the Norwegian equivalent of the practice-based research being done in Sweden. In both Rylander’s project Kontentum: återblick, omformulering, dokument [Content: review, reformulation, document] (Rylander 2012) and Slotte’s project Second Hand Stories – Refections on the Project (Slotte 2011), artworks play a very central role. A refection (in text) is required in Norway as it is in Sweden. In Norway that reflection is expected to be closely linked to the artworks which are produced within the framework of the practice-based development work. In their projects both Slotte and Rylander focused on ceramic reuse. For both of them, it is the products of the art industry – objects which after being made were used and were part of people’s everyday life – that become their raw material. By processing, reducing and reconstructing this raw material, both individuals renegotiate the objects’ original meaning and function. They create new meaning from old.

Based on my contact with the Norwegian research environment, it is my impression that greater weight is placed on the artworks that are presented within Norway’s
equivalent to practice-based research. In Norway the term practice-based development work is used instead of practice-based research. The practice-based development work in Norway may be said to relate somewhat more freely to the academic form and tradition than is the case in Sweden.

Through my participation in the network, I have a relatively good overview of the Scandinavian situation in practice-based research and practice-based development work. I have also taken a broad look at the craft-linked research being done outside the Scandinavian context. My attempts at scanning the research being done in Finland and the UK, for example, have not revealed any work with obvious links to my own. However, it is not impossible that I have missed something which could have been relevant.

This attempt to place my research within a context can be considered as somewhat eclectic, as so far there is no established practice-based research field in the field of craft in Sweden. I have therefore drawn on research from a diversity of other fields in order to create a context for my own research.

The dissertations of my doctoral colleagues in practice-based research have not infrequently lacked any overview of the research or an attempt to situate their own research in relation to other research. This can certainly partly be explained by the fact that the field is so young. However, it is possible to imagine other, complementary explanatory models. Art’s type of knowledge is special, and an artist may not necessarily regard all aspects of it as accumulative. The fact that a previous art worker did something before does not need to stop artists in later eras from doing something similar again. In an artistic context, rediscovering the wheel can create meaning. Reformulation is, of course, one area where art excels, and – at least up to today – every new generation of artists has felt inspired to tackle and give form to life’s great and eternal questions. Nor has borrowing inspiration without citing a reference historically been seen as any major issue in art. However, with new times come new customs, and opinions about art as a form of knowledge will presumably change, now that it so clearly must adapt to fit into the academic framework.

With my dissertation I am in the field of academic practice-based research. In my view, there is no opposition between practice-based research and research in practical knowledge. Both types of research share the fact that they are usually expressed through text. As a result of my research, for me writing has become a way to think. The text must be kneaded and reshaped just like clay before it gets the right form. In the academic world, thinking via text is a common way to think and is totally dominant in the disciplines that come under the label of the human sciences. The field of practical knowledge could be placed under that heading, and it would be reasonable also to place practice-based research there, because reflecting via text is the prevalent way to reflect. With regard to reflecting via text, my research is no exception, but as an artistic practitioner, I also have the possibility of thinking and expressing myself via clay.

It is on this point that practice-based research most clearly differs from research in practical knowledge. I have an artistically manifest element in my research and I express myself via both clay and text. With my text I try to follow academic form and tradition, and with clay I follow artistic form and tradition. I believe that an artistically manifest element must exist in research that claims to be regarded as artistic. It is the combination of my two ways of thinking that makes my dissertation work practice-based research.

In the textual part of this dissertation, the concept of clay-based languageness has been a hub. In the clay-based part, it is not the concept of clay-based languageness that is the hub but rather clay-based languageness itself. The text-based part thus connects in an obvious way to the clay-based part and vice versa. Reading one of the parts influences the reading of the other, which increases the richness of perspective. At the same time, it is possible to read and interpret each part as an independent work which stands on its own two feet. I myself place equal weight on the text-based reflection as I do on the artworks.

The clay-based part comprises the dissertation’s end note and was presented in the spring of 2016 as an exhibition entitled Slutkommentar [End Note] (Medbo 2016).
Unfortunately there is a difficulty associated with practice-based research, which is connected to the issues I have discussed earlier. The academic system within which practice-based research operates is primarily designed for text and textual artefacts. Problems therefore arise when the clay-based part of the dissertation has to be archived and made accessible according to academic standards. The clay-based part of the research will only be accessible in its entirety and in its original form in the exhibition, which will already have been held when this text is published. Anyone who did not attend the exhibition must make do with the filmic and photographic documentation made of it. Obviously these can never do full justice to the physical experience of the clay-based language-ness in the end note. In the academic context which encompasses practice-based research, this is a problem that has not yet found a really good solution.
End Note
The following section is a photographic documentation of the exhibition, entitled Slutkommentar, which was also the end note of the dissertation, plus a complement presented under the heading “Appendix” (see pages 208–217). A video documentation of the same exhibition and the included video work, Wheel-throwing from inside #2 plus a prior video documentation of the work Homo Capax are accessible at the following URL: http://hdl.handle.net/2077/46894

The end note consists of the following works:

Homo Capax – potter’s wheel, Plexiglas cage, furnace, conveyor belt, clay, thrower (=the author). (2012)

Wheel-throwing from inside – video (exists in two versions #1 and #2). (2012–2016)


Thinking through clay – rolled, hand-built, thrown and extruded stoneware and porcelain plus a magnifying glass, oil wax, salt water, halogen lamp, variable LED lamp, water pump with a variable function plus motorised angel chimes. (2015–2016)


In the Appendix the following works are shown:

Crowd – thrown and assembled stoneware. (2016)
Hairy – thrown, extruded and assembled stoneware. (2016)
Hose – thrown, extruded and assembled stoneware. (2016)
Velvet Worm – thrown and assembled stoneware. (2016)
The End Note, or parts of it, were exhibited publicly on the following occasions:

2016
Slutkommentar, Galleri Thomassen, Gothenburg: Homo Capax (video documentation), Enlightenment, Wheel-throwing from inside #2, Thinking through clay, Lerbaserad språklighet plus the Appendix: Hose, Hairy, Crowd and Velvet Worm

2015
Mårten Medbo, Galleri Christian Larsen, Stockholm: Enlightenment Zwinger und ich, Bommuldsfabriken, Norway: Thinking through clay (parts of)

2014
European Ceramic context, Bornholm: Enlightenment, Wheel-throwing from inside #1

2013
Homo Capax, The Swedish Institute in Paris in collaboration with Galerie NeC, Paris: Homo Capax, Enlightenment, Wheel-throwing from inside #1

2012
Making knowledge, Gutavsvbergs Konsthall, Gustavsvberg: Homo Capax
Homo Capax
Wheel-throwing from inside
Enlightenment
Thinking through clay
"Originality is for people with short memories"

Lerbaserad

In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is.

Lerbaserad språklighet [Clay-based Languageness]
"That works very well in PRACTICE, but how does it work in THEORY?"

språklighet

språkspel

"The harder you practice, the luckier you get."

'TS MOST IMPORTANT ROLE IS TO MAKE MEANING'
APPENDIX

↑
Crowd

→
Hairy
↑ Velvet Worm
← Crowd
Epilogue
It has been more than a decade since the research project presented here began, and just over five years since it ended. It goes without saying that some issues raised in the text have become less relevant over time, while others instead have become more so. What once made me seek practice-based research was my experience that the craft's material-based way of creating expression was called into question. As stated earlier in the text, materials and craft skill could be seen as obstacles rather than possibilities during the early 2000s. Today however, the number of crafts theorists that would describe materials, materiality as problematic or obsolete are very few. Materials and materiality are anything but doubted in contemporary crafts today. On the contrary, they are viewed with a nascent interest and curiosity.

Hopefully this thesis might, to a some extent, have contributed to this change in perspective, but in academia recent movements such as posthumanism or new materialism are considered significant in this change. Nevertheless, here we are talking about a fairly theoretical and perhaps distant relationship to the material world. The craft practitioners's much more concrete encounter with, and experience from, this world is rarely considered in these theoretical contexts. Having said this, it can also be stated that more voices from within the craft practices are making themselves heard now. This is not least due to the fact that practice-based research has become more common within higher art education.

An interest in materiality and craft techniques is of course a prerequisite for every practicing craftsperson. For my own part, I have become particularly interested in craft as a practice in itself. This interest applies to both my artistic practice and my practice as a researcher. As a researcher, I want to better understand and describe the practice of craft from an inside perspective. In the research anthology *Craft Sciences* (which includes researching craftspersons active in fields such as archaeology, design, cultural preservation and handicrafts), a number of chapters exemplify how craft practice can form the basis for academic research. In my own chapter – *On Wheel-Throwing and Meaning* (Medbo 2022, p. 316–329) – I reflect on the layers of meaning tied to craft practice in general and wheel-throwing in particular.
One question that constantly recurred as I, after my exam, presented my doctoral project was: "How has the research affected your artistic practice?" It is a question that cannot be easily answered. My belief is that everything I do in life has an impact on my artistic practice. My time as a PhD student is in this sense no exception and it has undoubtedly had an influence on me. During this time, I was forced to challenge my own artistic perceptions which gave me an opportunity to broaden my practice. As a PhD student I tried new artistic methods such as video, performance and kinetic sculpture. But when I reflect a little bit deeper on what these experiences might have meant for my practice, there is one thing above all that strikes me. In the thesis I express a doubt about wheel-throwing as a method for producing valid artistic expressions. I found this hesitation interesting when I, as a research student, got time to reflect on my professional experience. Parts of these thoughts have already been expressed in the thesis. But there was more to it. So after I finished my PhD, I gave myself the task to consciously investigate the potential of throwing in relation to my artistic ambition.

Today, I believe that wheel throwing is a highly relevant method for me to practice as I seek to meet my artistic ambitions. That was definitely not my view when I started my doctoral studies.

In this context, I would like to describe two series of works, Taxonomy/Morphology and Stolen Fire. Both are parts of my ongoing investigation of the artistic potential in throwing.

Within these two projects, wheel-throwing creates a frame and a starting point, albeit in slightly different ways. Practically the technique has an obvious meaning. By using it as I do, making shapes that encapsulate air, I am allowed to work with the clay while it is completely freshly formed and still very plastic. It makes it possible for me to find expressions that would have been difficult, or maybe impossible, to achieve in other ways. (see Medbo 2022)
In Taxonomy/Morphology I let gravity play a big role both practically and aesthetically. I simply hang my objects on a hanger while working on them, letting gravity do part of the work. The objects may remain suspended even during firing allowing the glaze to run and enhance the sense of gravity. In addition to the rather playful investigation of artistic possibilities in this way of working Taxonomy/Morphology has a darker dimension.

The work attempts to reflect the motivation of scientific research to name, categorize and dissect, as well as to master, control and claim the world for whatever purposes.

The series is an attempt to reflect the violence that often follows in the wake of scientific research that claims a self-imposed right to search for knowledge without any restriction.

There is a similar dark side in the work Stolen Fire. Although modernity, with its technology, bring promises of a brighter future, it also seems to carry with it the threat of its own demise. An important source of inspiration for this work has been the previously classified image material of nuclear bomb tests carried out by the US during the 1950s and 1960s, which was published in the book 100 Suns in 2003 (Light 2003). The images are very frightening, and at the same time strangely beautiful.

My generation was marked by the Cold War and the fear of a total nuclear war while growing up. Today, the atomic bomb
threat is as relevant as it was during the 70s and 80s. In addition, our contemporary society also lives with the awareness of other existential threats such as climate change and the seventh mass extinction of species.

To me, my craft practice is a fixed point in time when most other things are in motion. The objects I make in the Stolen Fire series are made up of countless wheel-thrown spheres. This means that many hours have been spent at the potter’s wheel doing very repetitive work. I experience that type of work as mentally restful, even if it sometimes strains the body. It provides a break in the restlessness and anxiety that otherwise preoccupies me. On a personal level, a tension arises between the dystopian theme of the work and the calming effect the wheel-throwing itself has on me. My hope is that similar tensions remain in the finished works where the meticulous craftsmanship embodies the dark theme.

Earlier in the thesis, I wrote about the immanent ethics of production and referred to Hannah Arendt and her description of this dilemma. The experience of duality I describe above is related to the risk she attributes to production. But it is also, in a way, the opposite of the risk she sees in man’s unreflective production. One of the purposes with the production of this work is to draw attention to the risk Arendt generally sees with production as such.
“To me, my craft practice is a fixed point in time when most other things are in motion.”
THANKS

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Mårten Medbo (b. 1964) is one of Sweden's foremost ceramicist. He was educated at Konstfack University Collage at the department of glass and ceramics. In 2010 he was accepted as a doctoral student in crafts at HDK, Gothenburg University and in 2016 he became Sweden's first doctor in crafts. Beside his ceramic practice he has also worked with public commissions, design assignments and studio production in glass. Currently he holds a position as senior lecturer in ceramics at Konstfack Collage of Art Craft and Design in Stockholm.

He has exhibited both nationally and internationally and is represented by Berg Gallery in Stockholm and Galerie NeC in Paris and in e.g collections at Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, John Michael Kohler Art Center in US, Rhösska Musset in Gothenburg as well as in numerous private collections in Europe and USA.
I gain my clay-based experience through my work as a ceramist. Through this work, I find myself in the middle of clay-based languageness; how this experience and languageness, can be described, explained and placed in a contemporary context, is, in all its simplicity, what my research is about.