

Gray Areas

-An exploration of metalwork in a contemporary context

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ABSTRACT

Ever since art and craft was separated there has been an ongoing schism between the two. The craft movement has been showed out of the fine art galleries and museums and has been left with country fairs and second handed rated galleries for exhibiting their work.

This has created insecurity within the realm of craft. Left artists doubting themselves and the importance of their work and has led to an immensely boring debate which, for the past hundred years has debated whether craft and fine arts could or should be regarded as equal artistic manifestations.

Maybe the importance no longer lies in trying to manically copy the fine art scene. But for once and for all, claim the space our work deserves in a contemporary environment, far away from rigid artistic boarders and a language that lacks all the right words. This essay investigates what it means to work in the periphery, in the gray areas of contemporary artistic metal making today and why the view on work in craft media is looked upon as handicraft and not art.

'I notice that a whole mass of objects which once bore the sense of truth have lost their content and are no more than carcasses: I throw them out. I will throw everything out from the past except that which is still in service to me. Some things are always of service: art.'¹

¹ Le Corbusier: *The Decorative Art of Today*, Architectural Press, London (1987)

Table of content

Introduction.....	1
The development from mere craftsman to independent artist.....	4
The tool.	4
A stepping stone.....	5
The word: craft.....	7
The modernists and their notion of craft.....	8
Studio craft.	10
Conceptualizing jewellery- the first barrier.....	11
We can't all survive on making wedding rings and bowls - two artists and the gray area.	13
Albert Paley	13
Suska Mackert	17
Similarities between the two.	20
Conclusion.	21
References.....	23

Introduction.

When I began this work I had no interest in the theoretical aspects of my profession as a metal artist. But the more I informed myself I began to notice an insecurity amongst other artists that I could relate to myself. What is it that we do? Is it art or craft? Or something else?

The discussions regarding art and design vs. craft has been going on for decades, yet, even today, not much has been consolidated and at large the discussion is still at square one. Relevant issues have been raised but when looking back one can see that it's still the same issues that are being grinded once again.

Maybe the importance no longer lies in trying to manically copy the fine art scene. But for once and for all, claim the space our work deserves in a contemporary environment, far away from rigid artistic borders and a language that lacks all the right words.

What we, as metal makers and artists create has indeed a strong connection to a long and rich history of making, and maybe this new approach is completely unorthodox, but within the walls of a more contemporary setting we have also begun to smear the lines between the artistic fields and are more and more opening up towards whatever disciplines needed for a certain piece's expression.

As a maker within the artistic field of metal I've become more and more interested in working in the periphery, to explore the gray areas of the field of metal artistry and the possibilities it offers.

Ever since art and craft was separated there has been an ongoing schism between the two. The craft movement has been showed out of the fine art galleries and museums and has been left with country fairs and second handed rated galleries for exhibiting their work.

This has created insecurity within the realm of craft. Left artists doubting themselves and the importance of their work and has led to an immensely boring debate which, for the past hundred years has debated whether craft/ applied arts and fine arts could or should be regarded as equal artistic manifestations.

From time to time this debate flourishes in different parts of the world and are usually met with the same responses. No one simply knows the answer and we, as makers, are again left to make the definition ourselves.

This may not be regarded as a problem but it becomes problematic when trying to raise awareness about this field in a more theoretical environment. Of course every artist as an individual has the possibility and maybe also the obligation to define one's own attitudes about the field he or she is working in and what that represents to them. But in a larger context the lack of a mutual language

has made it more difficult to explain and develop the field further. What is it that we do? What is it that we want?

When it even seems problematic to agree upon a common name for what we do then discussions about where the field are heading seem scarily distant.

My own interest in the field of artistic metal making is based on my fascination for techniques and materials but also the rich traditional history this profession offers. During my educational years, I've started to see things differently.

The lack of development within the field of artistic metal making, whether it's contemporary jewellery – or object making, why is that? There is definitely a discussion going on amongst my generation of makers about why the borders are so stiff and rigid? Aren't we all artists? Are we suddenly doing craft and not creating art, with all its statement?

The questions, which constitute the base of this essay, were initiated by the feeling that even though metal art is an existing art form in the shape of contemporary jewellery and object making there's an artistic insecurity amongst the artists and makers of today.

Many of the practitioners of the 'crafts' have found themselves caught in a contradiction. For one thing, although, the makers of pots, textiles and furniture have many understanding admirers, they have not found themselves admired as much as other 'artists'. Potters do not earn the same regard as sculptors, for example; and jewellery, for all its virtuosity, invention and ideas, remains a minor art.²

I look at myself as an artist and metal is my medium. However; this field with its entire contemporary context, still seem to carry the insecurity of the work of an amateur. Associated with hobby practitioners and craft fairs, a view often shared by both the public and the gallery owners. Yes there are specified galleries focusing on artistic jewellery and contemporary metalwork. But there are way too few and to be able to reach a bigger audience than the already initiated and well informed a shift and a broadening of the field has to take place.

Ideas and perceptions about how things are supposed to look, inherited from the modernistic ideas about shape, form and function are still very much defining this field. It has reached a dead end, and

² Peters, Alan: *The status of Craft* ch. 1, p. 18, in *The Culture of Craft*, edit Dormer, Peter. Manchester University Press (1997), New York

to be able to exist as an artist of today I feel we have to broaden the conception of what modern metalwork means and stands for.

Questions about craft identity and the niche of something new still resting on the foundation of tradition is my starting point for this project. Both in writing and in my physical work that will accompany this essay.

In relation to the traditions, how is it possible to continue and develop this profession today? Artistic expression and the use of knowledge in new contexts. To work in a gray area within the field, is it possible and what does it mean?

The development from mere craftsman to independent artist.

“You can teach a man to draw a straight line, to strike a curved line, and to carve it...with admirable speed and precision; and you will find his work perfect of its kind: but if you ask him to think about any of these forms, to consider if he cannot find any better in his *own* head, he stops, his execution becomes hesitating; he thinks, and ten to one he thinks wrong; ten to one he makes a mistake in the first touch he gives to his work as a thinking being. But you have made a man of him for all that, he was only a machine before, an animated tool.”

Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*

The ideas of the craftsman as a tool, a mere worker, was established during the Middle Ages, became regular during the Renaissance and a routine through the 1800's, with few exceptions. Not saying that exceptional craftsmanship wasn't demonstrated, often in abundance, but that lacks of personal artistic expression were apparent.

The tool.

With the organization of the guilds during the Middle Ages, a substantial set of rules regarding craft oriented professions were laid out. All based on a Master – Apprentice association.

The guild system was created to function as a protective community that vouched for a high level of quality and craftsmanship. But as many other organizational systems the guilds became more and more rigid and eventually turned into a complex muddle of rules and regulations that benefitted the privileged and smothered any attempts of development and change.

During the Renaissance the guilds had grown unmanageable in numbers and the system ridiculed itself. Every single step in the making of, for example, a knife had been divided into separate professions and it became impossible to individually control the whole line of production. The strict rules and regulations of the guilds also forbid you to work outside your specific area of expertise which further complicated everything. The conflict between the guilds and the needs of the new capitalists eventually became acute, and demands of change were raised. This resulted in a big move from the cities into the suburbs and the countryside's. The workers followed the industries and left

the cities and the regulations of the guilds to live at the gates of the factory under the protection of their employer. In a way this rather bold move didn't change things that much, a worker was still a worker, and could in reality only be associated with a new type of serfdom.³

This were later celebrated and romanticized by the Arts & Craft movement that viewed this as a statement due to the conviction of leaving the confined urban spaces in favor of personal and economical rural freedom. Few thoughts were put to what actually lay behind this change and *why* this took place. As in many other cases of selective historical hype it's safe to say that the romantic idealization did not necessarily had too much sense to them and mostly mirrored the present society and it's values.

When looking at the work being produced during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance it is easy to revert to the ideas of the craft maker as a simple tool. The apprentice's presentation focused on imitation: learning as copying. The apprentice was also contracted by religious oath to keep the secrets of his master and rarely did any knowledge spill outside the workshop. Things moved at a slow pace, and repetition of pattern, shapes and forms became the way to express ones skill and knowledge of the trade.

The craftsman could not explain why he did certain things; he only knew that they worked.⁴

The lack of imagination and the absence of artistic expression makes it's easy to think that no one had any sort of artistic aspiration. But it would be very wrong to assume that the medieval craftsmen lacked imagination and opposed innovation, their craftwork changed slowly as the result of collective effort in comparison to the more individual culture that later embody the Renaissance.⁵

A stepping stone.

By the Renaissance a shift in perspective suggested itself and the emergence from medieval craftsmen to Renaissance artist transpired. During that time artists such as Ghiberti, Botticello, Verrocchio, Brunelleschi and Cellini all have, according to Vasari's "*Lives of the Artists*", started their artistic careers as goldsmiths before venturing into other areas of art than goldsmithing such as sculpture, painting and architecture.

³ Lucie-Smith, Edward: *The story of craft – The craftsmans's role in society*. p 128, Phaidon Press limited, Oxford (1981)

⁴ *Ibid.* p 134.

⁵ Sennett, Richard: *The Craftsman*, pp.58-70, Yale University Press, New Haven & London (2008)

A good example of this transition from craftsman to artist is Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571), one of the most prominent goldsmiths of his time. Renowned for his elaborate artistic expression and willful approach towards metalwork.

Cellini, a true mannerist with his excessive virtuosity and style, did not merely want to be regarded as a simple craftsman, he liked his sheer skill of the trade to be acknowledged but was more interested in developing his own unique style than to pursue the fabrication of the employers' demands. The failure he had with completing a commission from the king Francis I of France (1494 – 1547) for twelve over-life sized statues in silver is quite good example of the approach that engaged Cellini.

I remember that I expressly ordered you to make me twelve silver statues; and I did not ask for anything else. You have undertaken to make a salt-cellar, and vases, and heads, and doors, and ever so many other things; so that I am quite overwhelmed, seeing all my particular wishes set aside, while you are bent on carrying out your own. So if you think you can go on like this, I'll soon let you see what I am wont to do, when I wish things done in my own way. Therefore I say to you; take care to obey the orders given to you; for if you are obstinate in pursuing your own fancies, you'll be running your head against the wall.⁶

Painters and sculptors were permitted to dream. The lesser, the craftsmen, were stuck with quotidian rationality. Cellini's aim was always to establish himself as an independent artist and by the end of his life, was exactly what he had succeeded in doing.

The knowledge being learnt in the goldsmiths' workshop shows that the understanding of shape, form, perspectives, technical solutions and artistic expression, all was possible to make use of in other materials than gold. A base of insight and skill was laid out that later, evidently, made them all prominent in other areas. The goldsmiths' workshop had been utilized as a stepping stone for broadening the artistic metal field into something new.

The reason for referencing Cellini, a Florentine Renaissance artist, might seem odd and out of place. But the ideas, that shaped his artistry, are still very much relatable today when looking at the transitions being made between craft and art and the artist that wishes for the two to merge. Skill and tactile knowledge are indispensable companions in the creative process of making quality pieces,

⁶ Edward Lucie-Smith, *The story of craft – The craftsmans's role in society*. p 152, Phaidon Press limited, Oxford (1981)

but if recognition never is achieved for what's 'on the table' but for historical perception and twisted notions of what that is there's no wonder that feelings of insecurity and confusion arise.

The word: craft

The word craft has, at least in Sweden, somewhat of a negative sound to it. Mashed together with the perception of what handicraft and woodwork stands for. Crooked candleholders and bowls made with the best intentions, but later directed to the box in the garage intended for the yard sale. Craft has become associated with the amateur and futile efforts of creation.

Even though this might be an exception to the overall comprehension of what craft is there's definitely interesting to see how the word has been implemented during the years. During the years different inputs and meaning has been associated with the word *craft*. However, past means and past means and apprehensions have managed to linger on and thus created a very long line of referential meaning of the word.

In the book "*The Culture of craft*" author Paul Greenhalgh brings up the definition and implication of the word *craft* and how it has changed throughout the centuries. An interesting comparison that reflects and highlights a noticeably change of the word and its social value.

During the 18th century craft was still referred to as a way of *doing* things, rather than *making* them. To be crafty, to be cunning and skilled, often used to describe political acumen and shrewdness rather than being a skilled practitioner of manual sort.⁷

The contemporary meaning of 'craft', 'craftswoman' and 'craftsman' first appear as common currency in the last quarter of the 19th century and with the beginning of the Arts & Craft movement . Strongly influenced by the social restructuring that took place and the ideas and ethics of John Ruskins (1819 – 1900) and William Morris (1834 – 1896) who both advocated the *Pre-Raphaelian* ideas about an anti-industrial retreat in favor of manual craft and the aesthetic values that it created. They believed in the elevation of craft instead of the escalating use of massproduced goods.

During the later part of the 1800's, Paul Greenhalgh notes, that the Decorative Arts are in the process of being separated from Fine Art, where painting and sculpture stood as the top choice of

⁷ **Dormer, Peter:** *The culture of craft*, pp 5-7, Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York (1997)

expression. In the 1920's craft becomes divorced from design and thus, inevitably, 'craft' becomes intellectually isolated from both the pursuit of beauty (art) and purpose (design).⁸

[...] Dominated by the seeming everlasting heritage of Romanticism, the majority of recent thinkers have considered art to be a state of mind, an outlook, a way of seeing things rather than doing things. Art is centered in the artist, the absolute individual, rather than in the object or in society. This vision of the artist has been the key to much avant-garde activity. Dada, Surrealism, Art Brut, NeoDada and Arte Povera, all pushed Romantic Anarchism and individualism to an extreme and inevitable conclusion. For them, art resided in the mind, it emanated out of life-style, welling up out of intensity of *being*. [...]⁹

This schism is important to highlight due to its huge impact regarding how the public (me and you) and the critiques (writers, galleries, museums etc.) relate and refers to work made in traditional craft media.

The modernists and their notion of craft

In 1925, architect Le Corbusier (1887 – 1965), a reductionist by all means, published the book *The Decorative Arts of Today*¹⁰. A raging comment to its predecessor's outdated form language with its impracticality and unnecessary decorative ornaments that no longer made sense, and only stood in the way for the modernistic idealists: Design accessible to everyone. Design based on the democratic ideas of availability and large scale productions reaching the masses.

Modern decorative art of today is not decorated.

But we are told that decoration is necessary to our existence. Let us correct that: art is necessary to us, that is to say, a disinterested passion that exalts us.

So to see things clearly, it is sufficient to separate the satisfaction of disinterested emotion from that of utilitarian need."¹¹

⁸ Dormer, Peter: *The culture of craft*, pp 5-7, Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York (1997)

⁹ Greenhalgh, Paul, Ch. 2, pp. 41 – 42 in *The culture of craft* edit Dormer, Peter. Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York (1997)

¹⁰ Le Corbusier: *The Decorative Art of Today*, Architectural Press, London (1987)

¹¹ *Ibid*, *The Argument* pp 21-26, Architectural Press, London (1987)

The aspect of functionality and user friendliness became one of the most important elements in the designing and making of products and objects. Decoration and adornment was banned, considered unnecessary and outdated. Traditionally bound to craft; folk culture; and consequently therefore not contemporary. Hopelessly linked to reactionary ideals, smothered with traditional values. Clean, industrially made, shapes became the style of the day and the long-established *ways* things had been *traditionally* made became outdated and replaced by machine operated labor.

There was not a question on what was considered to be the future.

The age of steel was born.

[...] It was the age of metals, the age of steel. The steel in our hands was the machine; with the machine came calculation; with calculation, the solution of a hypothesis; with the solution of a hypothesis, the resolution of a dream. In the space of a hundred years, revolution was fomented: the industrial revolution, the social revolution, the moral revolution.

Industry blew upon the world, and there was a hurricane.

The industrialist thought to himself: "let us smother our junk with decoration: decoration hides all manner of flaws and blemishes".

The sanctifying of camouflage. Desperate inspiration and commercial triumph."¹²

Fundamentally the separation of *making* from *meaning*, and the separation of the arts into categories of *higher* and *lower* have ultimately put craft, and all associated with it, into the least favorable positions regarding means of artistic expression. The reason for this historical detour is an attempt to show how the attitudes, manifested throughout the centuries are defining us as artists in craft medias to this today.

¹² Le Corbusier: *The Decorative Art of Today, The Argument*, pp 21-26, Architectural Press, London (1987)

Studio craft.

[...] After 1918, aestheticians and practitioners associated with the fine arts steadily legitimized the idea that the two [fine art and craft] were two wholly separate realms. This had a drastic effect on the standing on craft. Two main types of discussion have dominated. The first relates to the process of making art and the role of that of the artist. The second is to do with where exactly the phenomenon “art” resides in relation to “art objects”.¹³

The Studio Craft Movement, which traces itself back to the 1920’s and earlier, was not an individual artistic yearn for expressive freedom, but centered in art and design departments of established institutions. The education was taught in the spirit of the Arts and Craft Movement and its emphasis on both the handmade object and the importance of the individual maker. This was the perfect breeding ground for radicalizing craft and to progress into new artistic areas.

After the World War II, much due to the post-war baby boom, there was a substantial amount of artists that had been trained within these institutions, who fully embraced the radical ideas and pushing material experimentation and the development of the field further and further. However, it’s obvious that the rest of society hadn’t caught on yet. Artist Albert Paley describes this as quite an aggressive demand for recognition that collided with the established, conservative preferences and the wanting of an avant-garde that wouldn’t step down.

The development of a jewelry form as an art object [in the 60’s] was a very aggressive kind of thing. You know, people were dealing with very conservative things and sculpture and painting was art; metal wasn't. And like in spite of all of that you thrust an image in someone's face and they have to acknowledge its existence because it exists and therefore now acknowledge the value construct that developed it, which was the antithesis of what they [conservatives] were about.¹⁴

The clash between the worlds of fine art and studio craft wasn’t frictionless. And when reading Marcia and Tom Manharts’ text *The Widening Arcs: A Personal History of A Revolution in the Arts (1989)*, its apparent how divided the scene was. Here they are referring to the current gallery climate that awaited these artists after graduation. Still very much relatable today.

¹³ Greenhalgh, Paul: *The status of Craft*, Ch. 2, pp. 41-42 , in *The Culture of Craft* edit Dormer, Peter. Manchester University Press (1997), New York

¹⁴ Oral history interview with Albert Paley, 1982 Dec. 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-albert-paley-12256> (2011-02-28)

In 1963, in a University setting, we could take for granted that our work and that of our colleagues, whatever their media, would find the attention and regard that its aesthetic strength earned for it, object by object. But we also knew that those materials and techniques labeled crafts ranked low on in the eyes of the high-art world, and in many museums and galleries. [...] Work in craft media, whatever their degree of aesthetic sophistication and provocative content, must be classed as painting or sculpture to be shown.¹⁵

Works in craft media have since then been regarded as something inferior to fine art and even today the crack is quite obvious between the two. Galleries, museums and councils, all dedicated to the display of the tradition of craft and design, the tradition of objects. But what happens when the work becomes harder to classify and no longer can be put into one single box?

Why aren't contemporary objects, with strong conceptual content, miles away from any other intention than the experience itself, displayed in fine art museums and galleries?

Conceptualizing jewellery- the first barrier

In the 1970's, as a result of the vivid discussions and the demands for recognition being made during the 60's, a new agenda had loosely been formulated concerning artistic work made in craft medias. It was no hurricane, but small steps were being taken to try to broaden the field.

One example of this is Dutch artist Gijs Bakker who, in 1973, made one of the first pieces of contemporary jewellery with his piece the 'Shadow Bracelet', sold in a classical jewel case on a green velvet cushion. A thin golden thread to be put on your upper arm as tight as possible, the effect was that the bracelet almost disappeared in the flesh of the arm, only an indication remained.¹⁶

With clear historical reference and contemporary wit it showcased the future for art jewellery. The combination of extreme tactile knowledge, a strong conceptual message with a highly

¹⁵ **The Eloquent object** – *The evolution of American Art in craft media since 1945*. The Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma. (1989)

¹⁶ **den Besten, Liesbeth: *The joy of making the invisible visual by utilizing the hand***, Stockholm: Craft in Dialogue, 2005, Craft in Dialogue, 2005. http://www.klimt02.net/forum/index.php?item_id=4907.(2011-02-22)

intellectualized approach have since then been 'the way' to work with contemporary jewellery and object making. Unfortunately this attitude have in some places led to a reduction of technical know-how in favor of conceptual statements and a wow factor instead of a deep knowledge of manual effort and the tradition of the trade.

This, theory driven approach, can also be found in the fine art departments of the 80's where countless schools revised the traditional, technical, skill based education in favor of idea based knowledge.¹⁷ Maybe this is a mandatory step to take, to conceptualize and theorize to gain public recognition and to reach a higher level of seriousness and understanding amongst the academics. However, there's a thin line between chucking everything out with the bath water than developing the unique aspects of one's discipline.

¹⁷ **POSTMODERNT, Nya språk i konsten: 80-talets filosofier**, Moderna Museet i samarbete med Södertörns Högskola och Svenska Konstkritikersamfundet.

"Filosofi och teori fick stort inflytande både på konstskapandet och på tolkningarna av bildkonsten under 1980-talet. Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan och Jean-Francois Lyotard blev självklara referenser i diskussionen. På konsthögskolorna märktes en övergång från att undervisa tekniska färdigheter till idébaserade kunskaper. Idag är det svårt att särskilja teori från praktik." www.modernamuseet.se/sv/Stockholm/Program/Programserie-Postmodernt/,(2011-02-24)

We can't all survive on making wedding rings and bowls - two artists and the gray area.

A gray area can be defined as an area of a subject or question that is difficult to put into a particular category because it is not clearly defined and may have connections or associations with more than one category.

Indeterminate territory, undefined position, neither here nor there. For example, *There's a large gray area between what is legal and what is not.* This term, which uses *gray* in the sense of "neither black nor white" (or halfway between the two), dates only from the mid-1900s.¹⁸

When applied to art the idea of gray areas can be tricky to relate to. How to deal with the subject when there are no clear rules? However, this is an essential step to make if one wants to branch out into other disciplines, although not an easy one.

Albert Paley

Albert Paley (b. 1944) is one of the most widely respected sculptors of his era and the first metal sculptor to receive the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Institute of Architects, the AIA's highest award to a non-architect. In addition to his smaller works, Paley is also known for his often colossal entry gates that masterfully blend both sculptural and architectural elements. Known as a sculptor since 1974 when he won national acclaim in the US for creating the forged gates of the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery. But he began his career as an art jeweler.

In the early 60's, enrolled with the Tyler School of Art, Paley took one of his first jewellery courses with Stanley Lechtzin, head of the school's jewellery department. Lechtzin, who at that time was pioneering the use of electroforming in art jewellery an intriguing process that no one else was working with, became Paley's teacher.¹⁹

¹⁸ **Ammer, Christine:** *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*, (1997), The Christine Ammer 1992 Trust. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.

¹⁹ **McCarthy, Cathleen:** *Albert Paley: bodily ornamentation*, Thursday, July 22, 2010, <http://thejewelryloupe.com/albert-paley-bodily-ornamentation/>,(2011-02-24)

Going into graduate school a decision had to be made. Paley was still studying both sculpture and jewellery and needed to make a choice for his major year. Something he describes as quite a turmoil.

It was the whole thing that I had to make up my mind what I was going to do in graduate school, and in incredible turmoil of whether I was going to be a goldsmith or be a sculptor. And it was the classic kind of thing that sculpture was the highest level of performance in art and jewelry was insignificant, it was the minor arts, and I particularly wanted to be involved in a minor endeavor and that kind of - and it was like fighting back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. And then at the end I really look back and analyze the work, and at that point that I felt that even though the sculpture that I was doing was half-decent, I felt that with my own personality that the disciplines of metalworking was much more suited for my temperament, and I felt that if the work on the process is something that was really going to let me exercise my fullest extent, that this was much more attuned than what my composition was about.²⁰

It's remarkable to see how the perceptions of art and craft, higher versus lower and major versus minor still, in the 70's, was affected by the older notions fundamental centuries ago. Paley worked parallel with small sculpture and jewelry for a few years but by the mid-seventies sculpture appeared to be winning, judging by the jewellery he was making then. One example of his large scale jewellery is a pendant, 48 cm long, that extends the entire length of a woman's torso. Many of his other neckpieces were made in a similar style. Bold, heavy and so ungainly that he was criticized for making pieces that only amazons could wear. His response was pungent.

I was approaching jewelry as an art form, not a fashion accessory. The scale related to the human form. My jewelry was not a flat, graphic statement like a lot of jewelry is. It was three-dimensional, like the human body. The concept was bodily ornamentation.²¹

He quickly positioned himself as studio jeweller and was also teaching goldsmithing beside his investigations of material exploration with gold, silver, copper and bronze Paley started to shift his gaze to iron. First using it as a toolmaker to be able to shape his jewellery he then started looking at iron in a more artistic context.

²⁰ **Oral history interview with Albert Paley**, 1982 Dec. 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-albert-paley-12256>

²¹ **McCarthy, Cathleen: Albert Paley: bodily ornamentation**, Thursday, July 22, 2010, [http://thejewelryloupe.com/albert-paley-bodily-ornamentation/,\(2011-02-24\)](http://thejewelryloupe.com/albert-paley-bodily-ornamentation/,(2011-02-24))

In 1974, still working as a jewellery artist and a teacher, he submitted a contribution for the Portal Gates of the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery, and much to his surprise, he won the commission. A commission that would change his life forever. Due to Renwick's reputation and his work he started receiving other commissions that brought him into the world of architecture.

However he soon discovered that large-scale architectural work did not mix well with jewelry-making.

Sitting at a goldsmith's bench and swinging a hammer are totally different things.²²

Not only did he feel separated between his jewellery and the more sculptural work he was engaged in. He was also frustrated with the art jewelry movement as a whole where he felt the field had reached a stagnate point and that the field had become overcrowded and derivative.²³

In 1975 Paley once again was commissioned for a large scale project when the Hunter Museum of Art in Tennessee placed an order for customized gates with an additional fence. Paley describes his thought mode:

[...]And so I started the work on the fence while the gates were still in-progress, because there was a lot of finishing on the gates, so it was like an overlap. And the gates were basically a big piece of jewelry. I hadn't really come to grips with the structural aspect of the iron. There was a lot of very intricate drilling and tapping and interlocking of it. It was just a jewelry discipline blown up. And I'd just taken it and I'd blown it up into scale. And there's a lot of other ways I could have worked with the steel that would've been much more expedient, but it was - the thought mode was still jewelry.²⁴

This way of utilizing approaching metal as material out from a traditional standpoint is quite unique and showcases that even though the proportions and scale is being blown up the same methods can be utilized regardless of size. The distinctiveness of that approach is evident. You move away from perceptions on how things are usually conducted in favor for a more direct approach towards the materials and the possibilities it offers. No matter if it's monumental or miniature work the techniques and skill of the hand are applicable and there's no need to define oneself as one kind of maker over the other. Paley very clearly looks at himself as an artist, working in metal out from a traditional standpoint and has chosen not to be intimidated by the sometimes rigid borders of the

²² McCarthy, Cathleen: *Albert Paley: bodily ornamentation*, Thursday, July 22, 2010, <http://thejewelryloupe.com/albert-paley-bodily-ornamentation/>,(2011-02-24)

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

field and the people who has made it very clear that the most important thing is not what you do but what you identify yourself as in the sense of being a jeweller, an object maker, sculptor, a craftsman or a 'real' artist.

[...] The distinction between art and crafts and all of that - they just see me as a metal sculpture and they see this stuff - they see a gate as a piece of sculpture. I don't - I mean, a gate is a gate, and sculpture is sculpture. But they see me as a leading sculptor in the city I guess and so they wanted a piece of sculpture.

[...] The jewelry dealt with body ornamentation and the iron deals with architectural ornamentation - the major problem is the same. And the functionalism was very much part of a total consideration. I have done sculpture in the past but it isn't my real main concern. I mean, everything I deal with - I deal with form and I deal with contour and all of that but dealing purely with sculptural problems, I've never - very rarely do I isolate myself to do that.²⁵

Traces of Paley's initial studies in goldsmithing remain in the nuances of details, as the elements meet and intertwine. His virtuosity makes these complex expressive gestures appear almost effortless. Technically and intellectually, he continually pushes the boundaries of what is thought possible with iron and steel, in works ranging from objects of large, even heroic, public scale, to door handles, candlesticks etc.²⁶

This aspect of utilizing the knowledge being taught in the goldsmiths' workshop is the exact same way that the renaissance artist applied their skills in other areas of artistic expression. Once again it has been proven that this is a totally manageable way of working out from one discipline into another without the loss of sensitivity. If anything it shows new ways of working, new aesthetic expressions of known materials and the possibility to change perceptions of what is possible to achieve. All carried out in the continuation of tradition but with a very contemporary approach towards it.

²⁵ McCarthy, Cathleen: *Albert Paley: bodily ornamentation*, Thursday, July 22, 2010, <http://thejewelryloupe.com/albert-paley-bodily-ornamentation/>,(2011-02-24)

²⁶ **TRANSFORMATIONS: *The language of craft***, National Gallery of Australia, 2005. <http://nga.gov.au/Exhibition/Transformations/Detail.cfm?IRN=142974>. (2011-02-28)

Suska Mackert

Suska Mackert (b. 1969) is a German jewellery artist who studied goldsmithing at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam between 1994 and 1998, who later extended her studies at the Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam for a Masters degree where she graduated in the year 2000. She was recently named the head of the Jewelry Department at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in 2010, and has maintained an impressive list of activities—including being active on boards and juries for major awards, regular museum and gallery showings, and publications since she completed her Masters studies.

Since 1997 Mackert has rarely made any ‘real’ wearable pieces of jewellery but are instead using media such as photography, video, installation, text and printing matter to get her aesthetic point across. She has over the years grown more and more interested in jewellery as a phenomenon and in the role it plays in our lives. In her search for the significance of jewellery she is trying to explore its boundaries. She regards jewellery as an indicator of fundamental mechanisms of a social and psychological kind and her work is characterized by exploration and investigation rather than by functionality. For the final form of her works functionality is irrelevant.²⁷

The traditional aspects of jewellery and its functions are not being disregarded but not fully validate either. The complex web of traditions that is associated with jewellery is being used as a starting point, a point of departure. The objects, the documentations and the installations she makes describe a movement – a movement away from the obsession with the singular object and towards a reflection on the cultural context of jewellery as a whole. In particular, she turns her gaze to the unrecognized and sometimes even secrets ways in which jewellery and ornamentation appear in official ceremonies and social events.²⁸

In her work Middlesbrough (2005), a site specific installation on the floors in front of two low-priced jewellery shops, she adorned the floors with gold leaf letters that read: *Materials with a shiny surface reflect light, while elsewhere the light is fully absorbed*. The painstaking labour that went into the creation of this text is undeniable; however the piece itself was anything but everlasting. The shoppers, with their shoes and their friction, slowly wore the message away. Something craft critique

²⁷ Mackert, Suska: **Us, in flux: exhibition catalogue**, 5th artist profile Suska Mackert, 2010.
<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1865539576/us-in-flux-exhibition-catalogue/posts/55808>.(2011-02-28)

²⁸ Jönsson, Love: **Us, in flux: exhibition catalogue**, 5th artist profile Suska Mackert, 2010.
<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1865539576/us-in-flux-exhibition-catalogue/posts/55808>.(2011-02-28)

Love Jönsson describes as; “the valuable gold dissolved into fragments – a disrespectful, somewhat extravagant way of handling the material, seemingly at odds with the modesty of the shops.”²⁹

Mackert’s interest for the hidden relations between the wearer and the object is indeed unmistakable found in her work “*Affisches*”. Consisting of a collection of enlarged newspaper photographs, showing generals and politicians being publicly touched by other men for no apparent reason. On closer inspection the viewer might notice that there’s something slightly off with the photo. The men are all being decorated, receiving military rewards and medals. However, by manipulating the photos in this work all ‘jewellery’ or the equal manifestation of it have been completely blackened out leaving only the close human relationship and physical contact to be seen. This clarifies the relationship we, as humans, share over jewellery and how adornment has a strong social and hierarchical context that one might not reflect upon usually.

To send and receive messages through jewellery is, naturally, only possible in a social context. These social and performative facets of jewellery have been thoroughly scrutinized, and at times criticized and undermined, by a vast number of jewellery artists of the latter generations. Consequently, the psychology of wearing and perceiving jewellery has been a recurring topic in many a discussion within the field. The work of Suska Mackert builds on this tradition, but manifestly expands and deepens the theme. Making use of a variety of media, she underlines that jewellery’s complex grid of relationships between maker, object, message, wearer and spectator cannot be analyzed solely from the viewpoint of the physical encounter.³⁰

Although working very conceptual Mackert does not view herself as a conceptual artist but as a jeweller and emphasizes the aspects of craft and the process of making as one of the more important features regarding her work.

The process of making, the craft is very important; otherwise the work would be dead.³¹

²⁹ Jönsson, Love: **Images, codes and poetry: the jewellery of Suska Mackert**, 2005, Munich, http://www.klimt02.net/forum/index.php?item_id=928, (2011-02-28)

³⁰ **ibid.**

³¹ **den Besten, Liesbeth: Interview w. Suska Mackert from the exhibition REAL Craft in Dialogue**, Röhsska Museet, Gothenburg, 3 September – 16 October 2005, http://www.klimt02.net/forum/index.php?item_id=4907, (2011-02-28)

In the work called '*Ce souvenir sera toujours mon guide*' (2004) this love for tradition and technique becomes evident. The text '*Ce souvenir sera toujours mon guide*' is painted on the wall and surrounded by a thousand medallions each sawed out and treated by hand. The medallions, usually portraying Mary or some patron saint, are a characteristic Catholic icon. Generations of children have been given this piece of jewellery for their first communion. Jewellery like this also refers to pilgrim tokens. Each pilgrim receives one or buys one when, after a long journey, when finally reaching the destination of the pilgrimage. However in this installation the pendants bore no depictions.

First I tried to do it mechanically, by punching them [the medallions]. But it wasn't right. I think the metaphor is that you need time to create the image. The thinking process and the making process are slow and that gives the image its power.³²

In her work, Mackert addresses complex issues regarding social codes and rituals, emotions and customs revolving around a specific piece of jewellery or object. By deliberately using general aspects we instantly recognize from the art of goldsmithing such as precision, exactness, material references, history etc. she eases the viewer into her complex world of jewellery investigation. And even though she is not, in the universal term, making jewellery Mackert are intentionally using its properties as a way of communication.

I don't want to fit in this old hierarchy. I see there are differences between design or craft and art. I don't consider myself a designer; I prefer to consider myself a jeweller. I use jewellery as a source, but what I make is in a sense autonomous, although it is linked to something which is not autonomous – there is the confusion. People who see my work in a jewellery gallery are often confused. I may be radical, what I do goes too far for many people in the field of jewellery. Therefore I have to create my own context again and again. I think it is important for people to know what my background is, although some of my works will communicate without knowing this and actually I prefer that.³³

³² **den Besten, Liesbeth: Interview w. Suska Mackert from the exhibition REAL Craft in Dialogue**, Röhsska Museet, Gothenburg, 3 September – 16 October 2005, http://www.klimt02.net/forum/index.php?item_id=4907, (2011-02-28)

³³ **ibid.**

Similarities between the two.

Even though these two artists are miles apart when comparing their work, they share a lot of mutual attitudes towards the profession of being a metal artist working in the gray area.

The similarities between these two artists and what they share are that they've both kept their connection to the profession of being a metal artist but developed it into new contexts. Creating their own spaces within the field, broadening it and expanding it to be able to work, to exist as artists in a contemporary context. Regardless of conservative notions of how things always been.

Paley in the way of working by keeping his sensitive jewellery approach albeit in a larger context and Mackert in the referential aspects of working out from the historical traditions that surrounds goldsmithing while refusing to be labeled as one thing or the other. They both first and foremost view themselves as artist working with the tradition of metal making not as a goldsmith or a sculptor etc.

They've mutually succeeded in creating a unique, personal approach to this tradition-bound field without losing the connection. They've managed to break the barrier between disciplines yet still maintaining the base of goldsmithing that initially intrigued them both into working in the field of contemporary metal making.

This approach comes with a lot of freedom, but also with a huge responsibility. To take responsibility for the past, to be brave enough to develop a unique style. Not to get stuck in conventions about form and taste, but to use ones media to ask relevant question about one's own time.

Conclusion.

When looking back it is easy to recognize the thin red thread that runs through the history of craft. Never really looked upon as an art form and constantly belittled by critiques and others who got stuck in the object and couldn't see past that. If it's materialized it's not true art?

These attitudes, ranging from the Middle Ages up to modern times have immensely put a dent into the feeling of being an artist within a craft media today. Simultaneously with industrialization we got lost somewhere on the way.

The industrial complex has gradually conquered the growing market and slowly the practice and knowhow of craft; i.e. *the making of things for utilitarian needs*, has faded into a bleak memory of time passed. Since there no longer exist a massive need for our services within society, except for maybe making peoples wedding rings, it's now up to us to find new areas where our expertise can be fully explored and put to use. We no longer need any more functional objects in our cluttered lives, what we need we already have to an extent. What we need now, is art.

Art as in that the function and the purpose of a certain object is the story told or the feeling specific objects induce in the viewer. A starting point for the discussion using the object as the main focus.

Craft, with all its' history of making, is an empire. With its' own language, its' own attitude and the knowledge needed to create amazing art based on the rich tradition of metal making. There's no need for the insecurity that many artist of today struggles with. What differences us from the fine art departments is our huge knowledge and skill of the hand and our extreme material sensitivity. The ability to make whatever we want or need. We do no longer need to feel ashamed for our craft defined tradition; it's time to come to terms with the traditional past surrounding our field, to draw from that and to explore further into new areas.

The need for theorization, to gain academic respect. Have grown increasingly important during these past ten years. I suspect that this has to do with the fact that due to the lesser demands in society for the services we as makers provides have resulted in a yearn for academic recognition. An urge that has resulted in many people's willingness to step away from the only thing that clearly defines us; a deep knowledge about the relationship between object and user. The risk here is obvious. We, as makers of objects, can conceptualize until the world has come to an end. Without the object, the discussion is a very bleak and sad one indeed.

What I advertise is instead an artistic discourse with the object as the referential point instead of the conceptual idea that is so important within the world fine art. Yes, we are artists, yes we work with

concepts and conceptualization. But at the same time that we have the possibility to draw from which discipline we want regarding aesthetic expression etc., it's important in the discussion to be aware of the strengths and differences being embedded within our tradition. To highlight those, instead of manically trying to fit in with the rest, or worse, ending up as a bleak copy of where the fine art scene was ages ago, that's where we'll find our artistic strengths and characteristics.

This is not to be seen as an attack on the art of contemporary metal making, even though I'm aware that many people, even within the field, feel that the most important thing is to define oneself as a jewellery maker OR an object maker. I do not agree.

Personally I feel that what defines us in the artistic world is the tradition of the trade and material tactileness. By utilizing the tools being given to us in the form of skill and historical knowledge we have the possibility to create a contemporary response, to build on tradition and develop it. Not let it stagnate into a mish mash of endless copies. To be brave enough to develop a unique contemporary style, but still taking responsibility for the past.

The gray area represents a yearn, a need for something new. Where barriers and borders between disciplines are being torn down in favor of truly exciting works of art. Definitions are no longer needed. Labels are out of style. What you see is what you get. If it's good it's good. If you feel interested it's interesting. Regardless of the epithets surrounding the object itself.

This is an important step for us, as makers and artists, to take if we want to continue our existence within this modern society. Regardless if that sometimes doesn't seem necessary to anyone but us. Our culture has changed, and if we are serious about making artistic statements from a craft oriented history we too need to change our perceptions and attitudes regarding what it is we do to be able to survive.

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