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On Wheel-Throwing and Meaning

By Mårten Medbo

INTRODUCTION

How a Doubt was Turned into an Obsession

I am a ceramicist and in my practice wheel-throwing has always had a special place. It is the individual craft technique that I have devoted most time to and therefore, perhaps, have mastered the best. When I started my ceramic career as an apprentice in a pottery, wheel-throwing was seen, both by me and the other potters in the pottery, as the very fundament in the ceramic work. It is embedded in the pottery tradition, and wheel-throwing was for a long time one of the most effective ways of manufacturing pots. Later, as a contemporary ceramist, I have moved away from the pottery tradition and at the same time have started to doubt the relevance of wheel-throwing as a way (for me) to create artistic expressions. Despite my doubts, I have kept on throwing but for a long period I did not show what

I made on the potter's wheel publicly. Lately, however, my doubts have ceased and throwing once again has a central place in my practice. I would say that my interest right now could be described as a kind of obsession. Much of my previous scepticism disappeared when I was given the opportunity as a PhD student in crafts to reflect upon my own professional experience. It helped me to understand the sort of doubts I had and it also made it easier to see how the craft skills I possessed could come in to use in relationship to my ambitions as a contemporary ceramist (Medbo 2016).

After finishing my PhD studies (Medbo 2016), I gave myself the task to explore the artistic potential of wheel-throwing in a more active and reflective way than before. I set up a framework for the work: the prerequisite was that throwing would be the main shaping technique and that the particular possibilities of throwing would be readable in



Figure 1: A clay balloon being made, in part with the help of a thin metal sheet. Photographs by Hanna Stahle.

the finished works. I delimited myself to exploring wheel-throwing from both a technical and an artistic point of view. During a rather long period of my career lasting about ten years, when I didn't show any wheel-thrown work publicly, I still experimented a lot with thrown forms. Among other things I produced air-filled clay balls of various sizes—like clay balloons. The clay balloons had special properties that I could experiment with. They were formable in a special way. The air made it possible to continue working with shapes taken directly from the potter's wheel as it helped the clay to remain very 'plastic'. The enclosed air prevented

them from collapsing. Normally, a freshly thrown object is very fragile and is endangered by any handling. The clay-balloons, therefore, did not just resemble balloons visually; they shared the properties of a balloon too. If many such clay forms were put together into a larger structure, they could be made to adapt to each other in a particular way. I saw artistic potential in the wheel-thrown work and this way of working. One consequence of the method is that I have to spend long times of repetitive work at the potter's wheel to produce all the clay balloons needed. The work can be hard on the body and can be described as very monotonous.

The interesting thing in this context is that the difficulties have no deterring effect on me. Rather the opposite: something draws me to the potter's wheel and the more time I can give myself at the wheel the better. I mentioned earlier that I was unable to quit throwing even though at the time I could not see the potential to create artistic expression that met my standard. If I, as a ceramicist, do not see the artistic possibilities in a technique, must it not then be regarded as irrational to continue? Why did I still continue to throw?

Meaning

My research is heavily influenced by the field of practical knowledge and the use of experience writing. Within this research field, professional experience is placed at the centre and forms the basis for in-depth reflection on one's own professional practice and the conditions that surround it (Josefson 1991; Nergård et al. 2005; Ljungberg 2008; Gunnarsson 2019). Typically a retelling of some episode of significance from the practitioner's professional life would function as the hub of which the reflection starts and then revolves. Presented in this anthology, Birgitta Nordström uses work stories of weaving as a means to investigate the ritual importance of textiles and their uses in relation to death, and Anna Holmqvist develops the Production Novella to elicit the industrial heritage of Masonite and its potential in furniture design. The opening story about my concerns about wheel-throwing has a similar function in this text. What is it about the wheel-throwing that attracts, as it seems, beyond sense? These wonders will be the theme for this chapter and the starting point for a

Figure 2: (Previous page) Clay balloons assembled to a larger structure. Photograph by Mårten Medbo.

reflection on the meaning in and of craft in general and wheel-throwing in particular.

Attempting to capture and describe meaning, whatever that meaning may be, is a risky endeavour. Meaning is a blurry, slippery term. There are many craft and practitioner researchers that have approached meaning from different angles, embedded in the materiality and the making processes (Boos 2009; Ingold 2009; Nimkulrat 2009) or associated to knowledge and communication (Mäkelä 2007; Malafouris 2008; Groth 2017). In this text I will focus on meaning that has been deeply important in my life. Turning to my own experiences in pottery, the meaning created by and through the craft goes in two directions. The first is directed inward at me, myself, as the person performing, and the other is directed outward, toward our shared world. Inner meaning is created primarily from the physical and cognitive faculties that the craft can bring to life within the practitioner. Here, the act itself is central. The outwardly directed meaning is generated through the capacity of crafts to communicate via the materials formed by the craftsperson (Medbo 2016). This meaning is linked to the results of the crafts. The outwardly directed meaning, or the communicative meaning, emerges in the encounter between peoples and materials. My reflection begins with meaning that is directed inward, toward the craftsperson's self.

THE INWARD MEANING OF CRAFT

To begin, I would like to emphasise that the inward meaning that I have experienced requires reasonable working conditions if it is to emerge at all; that is, I as a craftsperson must have independence and take responsibility for the whole work process. As a ceramicist, I have had the fortune of working under precisely such conditions and have repeatedly ex-



Figure 3: : Assembling of thrown parts. Photograph by Hanna Stahle.

perienced a deep sense of meaning in the crafting process. It is possible to repose in that meaning and dwell on the situations in which it is experienced. The meaning, then, is linked to the crafting practice itself and not the ultimate result. There is a risk here, as meaning is created through the practices themselves, that their practitioners can repress the result and effects of their actions (cf. Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Arendt [1958] 1998; Sennett [2008] 2009; Medbo 2016).

Wheel-throwing as a craft has a long history, one in which the craftsperson has a deeply intimate and sensual relationship to the clay material. I

consider the sensual aspect to be significant in and of itself. The meaning that is generated through crafting, however, is multifaceted, and it cannot be explained simply as a close, sensory relationship between craftsperson and material.

A Special Sort of Logic

For example, there is a special sort of logic in the craft. Eventually, every craftsperson knows that mental and physical effort is required to penetrate and comprehend that logic. The logic of crafts is a practical one. This counts at least for the parts of the craft that are not dictated by external percep-

tions of it; that are not dependent on how its significance is culturally or socially read. It is, one might say, 'pure' craft knowledge, referring also to Gustav Thane in this anthology, concerning the physical requirements that make the craft possible—the body, the material, and their interplay (cf. Malafouris 2008). When it comes to throwing, knowledge about material manipulation, hand movements, and the clay's qualities during rotation are defining for this aspect of the craft (see also Groth 2015). There are different ways to swim but, in essence, all swimming follows the same principles. The same goes for throwing. The fundamental principles are non-negotiable—in swimming and in throwing. Because of the specific and compulsory conditions, throwing makes certain physical and mental demands on the thrower in a particular way. Throwing determines how attention is focused and how the physical responses are made. If perceived from a Platonic ontology, these fundamental requirements may be described as the idea of the crafts. And just like any other logical system, it is perceived as meaningful for anyone dependent on it.

Possessing and obtaining craft knowledge is satisfying in itself. The logic of crafts is the fundamental requirement for learning the skills. While practicing a craft, knowledge is revealed directly and patently. Learning takes time, and all of the notations that accompany the practice of a craft may perhaps lapse into dullness. Personally, however, I derive continual joy from developing my skill as a thrower. When practicing a craft, actions and movements must be performed over and over again. The repetition should not be mistaken for a completely uniform process, however. Each repetition makes small, precise adjustments of the actions possible, based on insights gained in the previous attempt. On top of that, when practicing

a craft, the craftsperson can test their perceptions of the craft's limitations more radically, thereby challenging the technical and formal perceptions about what is possible that are embedded in the craft traditions (cf. Tempte 1997, 81). Every opportunity to practice the craft becomes an opportunity to sharpen one's skills. Correspondingly—in my case, not throwing—I lose focus and skill. Craft knowledge makes demands on the entire person and links the craftsperson to the material world. This knowledge makes no differentiation between the physical and the spiritual; it is theory and practice as one.

The Joy of Repetition

There is also, in the practice of a craft, a possibility to enter a certain mental state. Flow is a relevant concept to discuss in regard of inner meaning. According to the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990; 2003), flow could mean slightly different things for every person, trying to describe their own experience of the phenomena. But basically it describes a mental state that makes the person involved in the activity forget about themselves. It is only the task at hand that exists and the person is filled with satisfactory and joyful feelings during the activity (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 58). One basic factor common to all activities with the capacity of inducing flow is said to be that the challenge in the activity must be balanced to the capacity and skill at the person involved in the activity. The chance to reach flow increases the closer the performer is to her limit of what is possible. When in flow, the activity becomes a goal in itself and is rewarding without regard to the final result of it (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 16).

The experience I am about to describe here is of a slightly different nature, even if it shares some common features with the concept of flow as described

above. One thing that differs is that activity in focus here is not rewarding due to it being challenging mentally or physically. This is about the joy of repetition.

When manipulations and movements are internalised and have become embodied knowledge, it is entirely possible to set one's thoughts free whilst working. Naturally, there are often situations in which a craftsperson's full concentration is required, but in repetitive work there is potentially always room for free thought. In reality, the phenomenon is not much different than the liberating and calming effect that, for example, a walk can have on the mind (see also Huotilainen et al. 2018). Parts of the mind can easily be dedicated to other pursuits whilst one is walking, and it need have no detrimental effect on the quality of what one is doing. On the contrary, the quality of what one is doing can sometimes be improved by not thinking about what one is doing. When it comes to practicing embodied knowledge, analytical reflection about precisely what one is doing can be counterproductive, disturbing the process rather than supporting it (Nobel 2014). For the benefit of the final result, the knowledge must be able to come forth without conscious mental effort. I cannot claim that my thoughts are particularly deep or creative when I am throwing thousands of my clay balloons; instead, it is a question of a sort of meditative state in which one can repose—a state that can subdue both anxiety and stress. It could be added, with my ongoing studio work as an example, that the feeling of flow, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi, sometimes occurs during my work assembling the thrown clay parts to larger art objects. This is a process that is much more mentally demanding than producing clay balloons. (Figure 3)

The Perceptive Craftsperson

The experienced craftsperson, I would say, becomes a participant in the craft collective that tends to the knowledge in question. As a ceramist and thrower, then, I am always part of a collegial context, both through my own craft knowledge and my capacity to interpret the body of works that throwers have left behind throughout history via that knowledge. A craftsperson is linked to their own history and has amplified potential to interpret the artefacts related to the craft. This amplified potential of craft skills to interpret crafted artefacts is what the ceramist and archaeologist Katarina Botwid investigates in this volume. I argue that there is also an additional cultural perspective in which craft experience creates a context of meaning with a particular, craft-focused fusion of horizons. Craft experience renders the world tangible and concrete, but the craftsperson's sensual relationship to the world also explicates its complex character. Through crafting, the craftsperson participates in the formation of the world (see also Ingold 2021). But forming the world has a starkly limited capacity, and the craftsperson must thus also stoop before the world. On the whole, this gives the perceptive craftsperson an opportunity for a sensitive, dialogical relationship not only with his material, but also with the world as a whole (cf. Sennett [2008] 2009, 286–96).

I have provided a few examples of how the crafting process is capable of creating a sense of meaning in relation to its practitioner, as well as begun to touch on the meaning that is generated through crafting's results. This meaning is directed outward and is linguistic in character.

THE OUTWARD MEANING OF CRAFT

I argue that there is an inherent communicative potential in crafts. In principle, this opportunity is available to all craft practitioners—that is, not only to practitioners of art and art and crafts, although they are in focus here. The communicative potential is what at one time grabbed my interest and led me to dedicate my professional life to ceramics. Clay gives me the possibility of expressing things which are eluded to by the other linguistic channels at my disposal. And like my primary language—the spoken and written language—my clay-based communication also generates context and meaning. In fact, for us as social beings, language is essential on an existential level. It is a well-grounded statement that both art and crafts have the potential to create social meaning (Morris [1888] 2010; Sennett [2008] 2009; Rosengren 2015). Possibly, this potential to create meaning is what has been able to keep alive craft practices that can in many other ways be considered obsolete and that is why so many time consuming, old techniques persist in art and in crafts. I would say the ability of crafts to create social meaning is superior to their effectiveness in an economic sense.

Craft-based Expressions

As the reader will probably have guessed by now, I believe that art and crafts should be considered as fundamentally language phenomena. There is a point in discussing arts and crafts as linguistic phenomena. Besides the fact that the language perspective highlights the social and ethical aspects of crafts in a clear fashion, the part of art that generates meaning is also emphasised.

I suggest that the production of craft-based expressions basically shares the same prerequisites as every other production of linguistic expression. A reasonable point of departure to support the suggestion might be the assumption that all communicative expressions require some kind of materialisation in order to be perceptible and reach their recipients. Clay is my material and means of expression, and my task as a ceramicist is to make the clay communicate. And for this to be possible, I require craft knowledge. It is possible to extend this understanding of craft to encompass all linguistic production—not only that which takes place in clay. What can become linguistic materiality is determined by our perception, by what we can perceive. Clay in the form of ceramics can be experienced in a tactile manner, spatially, audibly, and visually. The linguistic means of expression that we utilise are of broadly different types and have broadly diverse qualities. Just as with physical capacities, it is possible to create languageness with the help of various means. Some linguistic means, such as speech, are fleeting, whilst others, such as fired clay, are sturdier.

But regardless of their permanence, both concern linguistic expressions. And in both cases, the communication and dialogue depend on the ability to express and also to interpret the domain-specific linguistic articulations. The faculties of speech and craft skill are physical abilities that must be learnt and practiced. It is easy to forget, but we all struggled to learn how to talk as children. Seen thus, it is entirely feasible to compare the articulative faculty that creates speech with the ceramicist's capacity of craft that allows us to make the clay communicate.

The “Mother Tongue” of a Thrower

Let’s assume that there is such a thing as clay-based linguality. By using an example from my thesis “Lerbaserad erfarenhet och språklighet” (“Clay-based Experience and Communication”), this could be further elaborated. Michael Polanyi writes in his book *The Tacit Dimension* how speech schematically can be divided into a number of levels, each one dependent on the previous; if you fail on one level, you will fail on every level to follow ([1966] 2013, 60).

This is Polanyi’s scheme for production of speech:

- 1a. voice
- 2a. words
- 3a. sentences
- 4a. literary style
- 5a. literary composition

Every level is guided by a set of rules and norms. This is Polanyi’s scheme of rules and norms for speech:

- 1b. phonetics
- 2b. lexicography
- 3b. grammar
- 4b. stylistic
- 5b. literary critique

In accordance with this system, I made an attempt to fit clay-based expressions into a similar scheme (Medbo 2016, 114).

This is my scheme for production of clay-based expressions:

- 1c. dexterity
- 2c. form, texture
- 3c. forming
- 4c. ceramic style
- 5c. ceramic composition

This is my scheme for guiding rules and norms for the production of clay-based expressions:

- 1d. craft-skill
- 2d. material knowledge
- 3d. artistic understanding of form and texture
- 4d. knowledge of ceramic style
- 5d. ceramic critique

The two systems do not correspond perfectly but sufficiently enough to show how clay-based communication and speech are structurally related.

Now I will try out the schemes as a kind of filter to better see what is going on in my own ceramic practice. I will focus on my ongoing wheel-throwing project. By putting the ceramic practice in a similar scheme as Polanyi used for speech, I hope to create a better understanding of some of the basic conditions for craft expressions in clay.

As mentioned earlier, I have put up a framework with a set of rules for my studio work: it must build on throwing, and signs of the throwing technique must be viewable in the finished artwork. Furthermore, I have decided to work with a kind of ceramic assemblage (see 5c) consisting of thrown parts, all with air captured within them. This narrow frame could be regarded as a personal artistic hypothesis for successful wheel-throwing or a kind of personal poetics for wheel-throwing (see 5d). By using my ability to throw I am able to create a repertoire of shapes to use for my ceramic compositions. Basically, I concentrate on two forms: the sphere and the toroid (Figure 4). The spheric forms can sometimes be prolonged to sausage- or egg-like forms. These forms function as building blocks (see 2c) or, according to the scheme (cf. 2a), clay words. As mentioned in the introduction, my clay words or clay balloons have special physical properties, mainly because air is captured inside them. In a sense, they are charged with meaning just like verbal words are. The meaning is not once and for all given and will change depending on context (cf. Wittgenstein 1968; Medbo 2016).



Figure 4: Examples of wheel thrown shapes. Photograph by Mårten Medbo.

From the same clay words it is possible to create an inexhaustible number of different compositions (Figures 5, and 6). The principal is the same as for verbal words. My clay words will have a personal character since they are pronounced by me. I have a certain mother tongue of throwing (see 4c and 1d). It is highly influenced by my time as a thrower-apprentice at Gustavsberg's Porcelain Factory. The throwing tradition at the factory (which has since been closed down) was primarily represented by the master thrower Berndt Friberg, and it is strongly associated with modernism and Swedish Grace. This is considered to be Swedish throwing at its highest quality (Eklund 2011, 111–23). I th-

row according to the artistic understanding of form and texture at Gustavsberg, technically perhaps most characterised by the use of thin metal sheets to remove all slippery clay and all traces of the hand from the surface, creating clay objects with smooth surfaces and clean lines (Figure 1). To continue the speech metaphor, my mother tongue of throwing can be described as somewhat supercilious. There are technical benefits of this way of throwing in regard to the rules I have sat up. Normally you would leave the thrown parts for a while to give them time to dry a bit before handling them in order to avoid messing up the sensitive surface (the captured air will prevent them from collapse, as mentioned



Figure 5: Examples of works done according to the method described in this chapter. From the exhibition *Morphology* at Avesta Art, Avesta 2021. Photograph by Mårten Medbo.

earlier). But the drying makes the parts lose some of their plastic properties which I am dependent on to realise my artistic intentions. But if all the slippery clay on the surface is removed by using a metal sheet, it is possible to make use of the freshly thrown parts immediately to build bigger structures without making a smudgy mess of it all (see 2d). The number of parts in one finished ceramic work can range from two (Figures 5 and 6) up to several hundred.

The languageness of clay also involves stylistics. Actually, as a ceramist, I actively try to cultivate my

own style since a personal style is an important asset on the art/craft scene where I show my work. It is easy for me to tell from where I was influenced as a thrower, but it is much harder to say from where I am influenced when it comes to my ceramic style.

Obviously, there is more than one source of relevance here and the sources are not only from the field of ceramics. Nature, cartoons, philosophy, films, and contemporary art are sources of inspiration. It is also apparent that my ideas of ceramic style and the critique have changed over the years. That is not very surprising. It would have been very

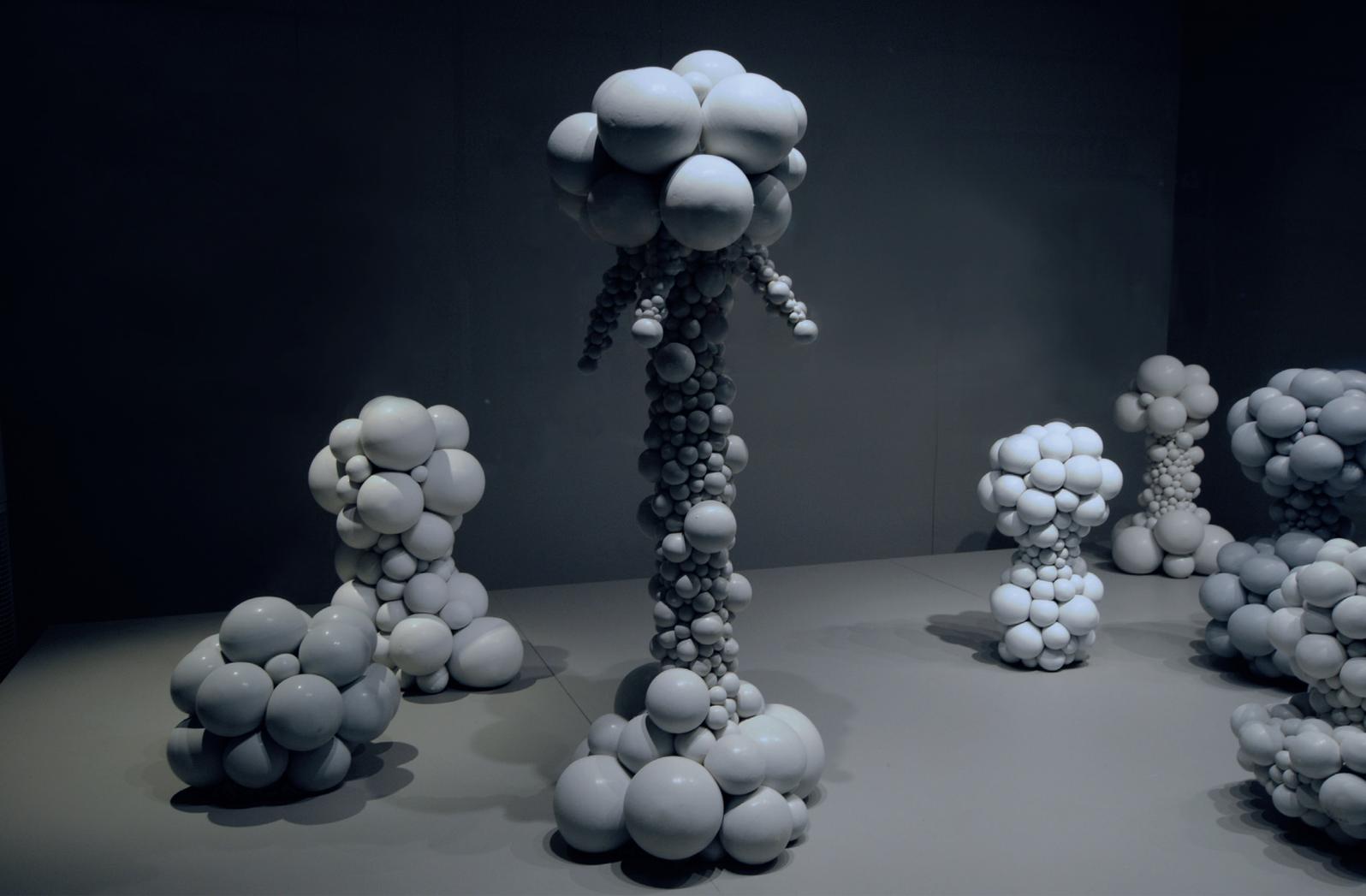


Figure 6: Examples of works done according to the method described in this chapter. From the exhibition *Stolen Fire* at *Exposé*, Linköping 2020. Photograph by Mårten Medbo.

depressing if what I wanted to say, and how I articulated that, hadn't changed during my 30 years in the profession. What has not changed very much, though, is my mother tongue or my craft skill, even though it has hopefully improved a bit.

DISCUSSION

The languageness of craft-based expressions and the use of traditional craft techniques are not always valorised or passable. The materiality may be seen as a hindrance. The Swedish Public Art Agency's director Magdalena Malm states, as an example of

this perspective, that contemporary art "has liberated itself from material, [from] museum halls like no other art form, and expanded to a series of other areas" (Nyström 2013, 9, my translation). The point of view represented in the quote is not uncommon in art theoretical contexts. In alignment with the western, dualistic point of view, the immaterial is more desirable than the physical, tangible materiality (Toulmin 1990; Bornemark 2018). Here, the material is regarded as an obstacle and something from which to break free. If material is something to avoid, and words and text are not

considered as possessing materiality, verbal language, preferably in the form of text, gets a higher status than more prosaic materialities such as, for instance, clay. This idea, which plays an important part both in conceptual art and conceptual crafts, is counterproductive when it comes to the linguistic richness of art and its capacity to create meaning. Ideas about immaterial art lead to a kind of linguistic imperialism (cf. Wallenstein 1996, 141).

In the traces of industrialisation, a lot of craft practices have been suppressed and unable to compete with mechanised production. Arguing in favour of the relevance of traditional crafts today can, in a broader perspective, be difficult. For me, however, crafts are more than a(n) (ir)rational production method for the manufacturing of various things. For me, crafts have always been relevant because of their capacity to create meaning. In many ways, that meaning chafes against modernity's rational and economically coloured conception of the world.

I have in this chapter explored craft and meaning, both from a personal inward perspective and a communicative outward perspective. Both of these perspectives on meaning may explain why I, and many others, stubbornly stand by our craft practices and our material, and why art and crafts still continue to affect and concern us. I believe that it is vital to reflect on and discuss both craft and materiality in relation to meaning and I think that it is desirable that everyone who, in some way or another, has an interest in the field feels compelled to participate in such a discussion. It is my hope that this text will inspire to that.

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