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# TRANSGRESSING THE BORDERS OF TEXTILE ART, OR - SWEDISH ARTISTS AS CRAFTSMEN?

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In the workshop “Art(ists) and gender”, as part of the workshop stream called “Languages, Images, Representation”, on the conference dedicated to Gender and Power in the New Europe, I’d like to take the opportunity to bring forth a more than a century old and from the beginning seemingly nationalistic and anti-modern movement: the Swedish handicraft society, or rather, the representations of artists within it, as mirrored by the magazine *Hemslöjden*. As an Art Historian, I will provide an integrated gender- and genre perspective when looking at the entangled notions of femininity and the textile arts- and crafts. During the workshop, pictures and pictorial analysis will highlight the presentation.

The word ‘hemslöjden’ is a compound that consists of two parts: ‘hem’ that means home and ‘slöjden’ is the definite form of a noun that has to do with handicraft. Gillian Naylor, in an attempt to translate and describe Swedish design, uses the word ‘sloyd’, as a tribute to the fact that the sloyd-organisations have played a great part in developing the Swedish style (Naylor 1990). With the adding of ‘home-’part, the connection with an informal economy and the private sphere is obvious. Also obvious is that in an historical perspective the home-sloyd organisations partook in more female related activities than did the, mainly male, sloyd-organisations. Both movements began in the 1900<sup>th</sup> century as associated with the international Arts- & Crafts or Werkbund movements, but were later to separate. In the light of the more recent development of the movements, it’s also clear that a split in the focusing of professionalism and commercial standpoints has increased. *Svenska Slöjdföreningen* (The Swedish Society of Crafts and Design, now known as *Svensk Form*) has turned its magazine *Form* into a design magazine, whereas the handicraft society has been moving into the hobby compartment, making *Hemslöjden* a lifestyle magazine. The former thus providing an accurate taste formula by which to make people *buy* good design and the latter to provide tasteful models from which to *make* objects for the Swedish home by means of traditional techniques and material.

In this paper I will focus on the image and representation of the textile artist during the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The empirical material is the magazine *Hemslöjden*. The situation differs from the modernist era in which the handicraft movement, as described above, developed. At least in a post-modern theory, genre hierarchies seem to have imploded. What has that meant to the possibilities of artistic expression? May textile materials and techniques be used as part of a feminist practice?

## **Swedish Artists as Craftsmen?**

The ideological history as briefly presented above might explain the involvement of Swedish artists – presumably positioned in the sphere of high culture – in the realm of the minor- or applied arts of (handi)craft. The valour of the words give a hint to the importance of the activities they describe, perhaps having less to do with the actual product than its producers.

Of course artists might be craftsmen in the sense of the word that they are skilled, they excel in what they do. But there are other connotations to the words that seem to favour the activities of the artist, at least outside the handicraft society. What about the outcome of their artistic activities within the handicraft societies? Is the sloyd, as a product, to be seen as art or craft? Somewhat simplistically put: Sloyd is both art and craft, largely depending on by whom it was produced. The famous textile

artist Edna Martin says at one point that she has no problems with the concept of sloyd. “-I do a little sloyd myself” in her spare time. (*Hemslöjden* 1998/6) This is touching upon difficult questions of authorship, amateurism and professionalism. In a sense I bypass these questions in my study, as presented below, of the magazine *Hemslöjden*, by simply looking at *who* is given title ‘artist’ in the magazine. But at the same time this is the nod around which the discussion is circling. I will return to this question in extent later, when discussing the social production of art but for now focus on the artist.

On quite a few occasions the artists in *Hemslöjden* refutes their honorific title. For example, when congratulated on her 100th birthday and confronted with the interview for the article to commemorate her, Greta Gahn is in denial of her own importance. She keeps on commenting on others as great artists and craftsmen. “I was never a creative artist” she says and later she explains that “when I was young it was impossible to think of a girl engaged in any other profession than the textile” (*Hemslöjden* 1994/6, pp 31f). Partly these statements are to be seen in the light of whether it’s suitable for a woman to promote herself in general. When there are Great Women Artists in *Hemslöjden*, they are usually, in some way or other referred to as Founding Mothers, as for example with Märta Måås-Fjätterström, thus associated with female virtues (*Hemslöjden* 1990/1). Additionally there seem to be strict rules, stipulated within the handicraft traditions, of how to sign one’s work. The craftsman might put his mark, in cipher, discretely, on a product, a wooden bowl for example. All the fine linen is to be marked by the married woman’s monogram, in white on white, preferably, or if used for everyday towels in red, simply marking the ownership (*Hemslöjden* 1996/4).

In tracing the word artist in the magazine’s issues during the 1990s I found that there were two gender biased categories in which the word art- or artists appear: as Textile Art and as Folk Art. As opposed to the textile artists, the folk artists hadn’t gone through artistic education. What surprised me the most was that the folk artists were almost exclusively male. With another definition of the word Folk Artist, referring to what people do outside the Art World, (Becker 1982), almost everything in the magazine *Hemslöjden* would pass as Folk art. In *Hemslöjden*, artists of both sexes are largely, but not solely, divided by the gender specific handling of wood or textile – where the wood is associated with masculinity and textile with femininity – in any case it’s obvious that the material matters. The artists in the examples I will give below are all textile artists however not dealing exclusively with textile material and/or techniques. There are a wide range of approaches to be put into perspective.

### **Representation of the Artist in *Hemslöjden***

On the cover of the magazine *Hemslöjden* 2001/5: A slightly tilted photo of a young, skinny woman with pitch-black hair. She stands in front of what seems to be a linen cupboard. Behind her is also a door, lined by a dark red drape, not covering the opening which leads out to a veranda. What appears to be a female figure is seated in the blazing sunlight, somewhat blurred by the bright, white, light and being out of focus. The central subject, the young woman is wearing a big smile on her face. She is dressed in a plain sleeveless white shirt. A red embroidered emblem is situated on her left hip, below the waist, right under which the picture is cut. Her eyes don’t meet ours but are instead focused on someone or something outside the picture plane, on the photographer’s left hand side. In her hands she holds a banner, or small hanging, onto which she has embroidered, in red on white: “I feel needed” (*Jag känner att jag behövs*) and under that her name: Malin Arnell.

The reason that she is one the cover of the *Hemslöjden* – apart from her being an interesting young artist dealing extensively, but not exclusively, with subjects related to traditional textile handicraft on different levels – is that one of *Hemslöjden*’s most active contributors, Gunilla Lundahl, visited Arnell’s exhibition in a place called Trehörnahult, in a dark forest in the middle of nowhere, on a hot

summer's day in July 1991. She was caught by the seriousness and the affection for the work process that Malin Arnell gave proof of. (*Hemslöjden* 2001/5) So was I.

There are some things that make this picture on the cover point to something other than it just being a picture of a young girl who proudly displays her embroidery. Firstly, the tilted picture plane, which might be a compositional compromise to catch the lady on the porch – she is one of the participants of the sewing circles initiated in connection to the exhibition, an important part of the puzzle that makes up the totality that is Malin Arnell's relational art work – but the askew angle also creates sharp, pointy corners of bright, light and dark, contrasting colours surround the artist. Secondly, there is the protruding, bright red emblem on her shirt, which by its sheer symmetrical centrality is drawing attention to it. It seems to be a quadruple feminist symbol, joined by the circle, altered perhaps to state a more queer standpoint. (In the thumbnail view on the homepage of the magazine, [www.hemslöjden.org](http://www.hemslöjden.org) the picture is edited so that the emblem is no longer visible.) Thirdly, the self-conscious display of the embroidered statement: "I feel needed" (*Jag känner att jag behövs*) The sentence is equivalent to the name of her relational art work. It's explained on handout paper in the little red sampler-binder she has made into her catalogue, providing clippings on textile- and feminist- theory and -practice. Malin Arnell has also made it possible for every visitor to purchase a material for making embroidery, following the instructions of the artist herself. The banner itself, this little piece of textile is thus central, both in material, ideological and relational aspects. (This does not, however, make it equal to the whole art work.)

With the image of Malin Arnell in mind, I began the research for my study of how artists are represented in the handicrafts magazine *Hemslöjden* during the 1990s. Could there be more where this came from? I found that about 152 of the more thorough articles presents artists related to the handicraft associations in one way or the other. Below I will give examples on how textile artists are represented, on how female and male artists might be depicted, and how gendered notions of femininity and masculinity are displayed.

Only few artists make the cover but one textile artist did it twice: From inside the foliage of a willow tree a man with a short, greyish beard peeps out, pin-pointing us with his eyes from behind his circle-round glasses. His corduroy coat blends in with the shadows but his hard-hat, made of straw, worn at a jaunty angle, and his casually tied knitted scarf in vivid colours, sticks out. The central half-length portrait reaches from the top to the bottom of the whole cover. The sharp willow-tree leafs flanking him, creating a tripartite division. No other text than the logo *Hemslöjden* is visible. When turning the page, to see whom the man might be, one is confronted with another smaller picture of the same man under which is stated: "Raine Navin wrapped in a crocheted blanket", with a reference to an article (*Hemslöjden* 1998/4). Providing an actual backdrop for the describing text of the article, there's another picture of the artist. He is wearing the same attire as on the cover, only now with a more offensive embracing gesture and not hidden in the bushes but out in an indefinite surrounding that might be a gravel pit. The words of the article's title spell out on the clear blue sky: "Don't be afraid!" and "What would handicraft be like without Raine". Turning the page there are three more small close-ups of the artist, now wearing different small, white, crocheted caps. The occasion, or the reason for this lavish/affluent array of pictures seems to be a stipend or award but the article also tells us that he is a frequent lecturer and an inspirational source. Raine is described as an artist, professor and a magician, an intriguing and inspiring man (*Hemslöjden* 1998/4, p 19). On another cover (*Hemslöjden* 1990/4) Raine Navin is depicted declining, seemingly asleep under a long-pile rug (designed by himself) on a field of coarse, seashore grass, under a blue sky. This time the occasion is that the magazine is featuring a special issue on carpets and rugs. The model of his rug is provided for the handyman to make one at home. (*Hemslöjden* 1990/4, p 45)

Few other artists are as popular as Raine Navin, apart from the founding mothers like Märta Måås-Fjätterström. In comparison to his contemporary he is unparalleled, judged by the quantity of pictures at least. Another of a male textile artist is on display in a way that is more typical concerning the governing rule of modesty that encompasses the representation of the artist, male or female.

The occasion is the greeting of the new professors in Textile Art at The University College of Arts Crafts and Design in Stockholm (*Konstfack*). On one of the professors, Hans Krondahl, there is an article in *Hemslöjden* 1990/4. Primarily the photographic material focuses on pictures of his works. There are large pictures of various gigantic interior decorations. Then, at the end of the article, there is a tiny picture of the artist at work. He is captured in profile and the picture contains equal parts loom and man, from the waist up. The background is blurred but it seems to indicate the placing of the shot in an atelier with a highly placed window and the paraphernalia hung on the wall, all out of focus. Instead, the perspective of the loom (which forms a dark triangle in the lower part of the picture) as well as Hans Krondahl looking downwards, helps putting focus on the artist's hands. This correlates to the words of the article which brings out his international career, but emphasises his craftsmanship even more. (During the whole 1990s there is not one article presenting the other Textile Art Professor, Veronica Nygren.)

In the time span of ten years and with different contributors, the ideals, of course, will vary. Two successful but quite different artists who happen to be women are to exemplify this: Gunilla Pateau-Sjöberg and Anna Sjons. The article on Gunilla Pateau-Sjöberg in *Hemslöjden* 1991/1, is included in an issue on felt and felting. The small black and white picture shows her in a woollen coat, in front of a giant heap of newly cut lambs wool. She is smiling. But in the interview she seems quite serious. She compares art making to life itself. "To make art", she says, "is as hard work as giving birth to a baby" (*Hemslöjden* 1991/1, p 24f). She fuses the ecological ideology with essentialist feminism in her three-dimensional felt objects, formally corresponding to the international Fiber Art.

Being part of a Swedish Fiber Art network formed in the late 1990s the artistic practice of Anna Sjons look quite different. The first time she is presented in magazine is in *Hemslöjden* 1996/6. Anna Sjons makes ritual objects (resembling small may-poles), tin-can looking metal jewellery, and textiles by the meter. Behind the piece goods displaying a vividly coloured, folkloristic inspired, asymmetrically scattered people and flowers pattern, someone is holding up the piece of fabric by the roll. That someone is casting a shadow onto the fabric. The outlines correspond quite well to the person standing among the trees and stones on the opposite side of the spread. Only now she is holding up another fabric, dark blue with colourful flowers and birds, behind her back, gently moving in the wind. She looks serious but put the fabric is playful, the game of peek-a-boo is close at hand and she declares herself close enough to tradition to reformulate it in her own way. This is true also of other art objects, titled *Livspåsar*, "Life Bags" by the same artist, now under the name Anna Sjons Nilsson (*Hemslöjden* 1998/6)

Anna Sjons Nilsson is more of the entrepreneur type of artist, who sees the *Hemslöjden* magazine and refers to the handicraft society as both part of her creative artistic space as well as one of her outlet markets. Gunilla Pateau-Sjöberg is focusing on the (international) art market for her objects but is at the same time, has chosen to participate in the handicraft society almost as a lifestyle, connected to the textile technique of felting. Also reporting from participating in international felting workshops Gunilla Pateau-Sjöberg provides an example of the international extension of the handicraft society into a global one as well as the internalisation of the handicraft ideology into the life world. (*Hemslöjden* 1991/1, p 28-31)

The handicraft societies all over are probably crowded with people who wish to have a meaningful hobby, wanting to make something with their hands. The artists are equally heterogeneous. The ones breaking the norms stick out. Men do it as result of their minority status. The majority of the textile artists are women who wishes to work creatively without going outside their expected norm or who wishes to brake the norm but choose to do it within the spirit of community of the fellow textile artists.

## Transgressing the Borders of Textile Art

The different problems surfacing in connection to the artist as presented above, highlighted by the cases shown, are not individual. Instead there seem to be related difficulties in society as a whole in evaluating cultural products and activities that doesn't fit into the norm ...

The Swedish textile artist Margareta Klingberg in the late 1980s took her double professional background as artist and forester and applied her knowledge to an art project in the forest. Her work consists of all the ingredients important to the criteria for making art within the framework of Swedish 'hemslöjd': natural material and techniques firmly rooted in a local tradition. When presenting her exhibition and the thoughts behind it to the readers of the magazine *Hemslöjden* 1994, Margareta Klingberg explains the art-theoretical background as well as the rural habit of taming nature by creating borders from the materials of nature itself. The techniques used, she states, are congenial with textile making, weaving and plating, but the materials are more associated with traditional wood handicraft as performed by men. (*Hemslöjden* 1994/5, p16) In the international textile art department this linking of traditional textile materials has a history that can be traced back under the name of Fiber Art. But how does it fit into the environment of Swedish handicraft? Which borders are crossed? In literal, physical, sense Margareta Klingberg has geographically extended the art-scene but is the field even further expanded?

Trying to tread the thin line between nature and culture, both marking the difference and blurring the boundaries, there are at least two different 'field-theories' that might be brought up in relation to the work of Margareta Klingberg. One that explains what has happened within the expanded field of sculpture to make this artwork possible, and then there are the field theories that might be supportive in explaining the chances of positioning of the artist involved in handicraft firmly within the art world.

The Art Theorist Rosalind Krauss watched with horror how the erect object of the sculptural monument – around which all art-theory hitherto had evolved – in the late 1960s suddenly turned into a hole in the ground. Land Art situated itself, far from the gallery- and museum institutions and far from the city square, in remote places. Competing in size and appearance only with the landscape surrounding it, on the one hand they were not made to be comprehended as a whole, by one glance, on the other hand not supplying a simple narrative by which to be read. Trying to explain what had happened, Krauss's theory of the expanded sculptural field evolved around the bipolar conjunction/co-ordinate system of the landscape/not-landscape v/s the architecture/not-architecture. The terms were presented within a semiotic model that also provides the borders as well as points to the possibilities of the expanded field. This model, she hopes might be helpful in viewing even "a pile of thread waste on a floor" as a piece of art. (Krauss 1985)

To place the plaited woodwork and other techniques used in the making of 3-dimensional textile art works within the expanded field of sculpture is not far fetched. It is not by coincidence I present Rosalind Krauss' theory in this context. The artist Margareta Klingberg admits herself to be largely influenced by the works and theoretical approaches mentioned above. As a field of great size Art should be totally sufficient to fit all. But sometimes it seems that fields are more defined by its limitations than by its extension. The field seems to be further divided not only by fences around it but also by hierarchic settings within the field. I will now move on into explanations of the making of art, as made by Art Sociologists. The field theory of Bourdieu may be seen to function more like a field of energy with clearly more highly charged areas closer to the conjunction of the economic and cultural co-ordinators. The shifting positions that Bourdieu detects in the hierarchic positioning, depends on whether it is charged with cultural, economic or social capital. (Bourdieu 1992)

Bourdieu is paying great attention on the educational system for the production of symbolic value. The textile artists of my study are all educated at The University College of Arts Crafts and Design in Stockholm (*Konstfack*). This particular institution educates artists who want to engage in wood as

well as textile or artistic materials. The artists are thus consecrated within the institutions of the art world but still, for large parts, do not exhibiting their work in the same galleries as artists who work with materials such as stone, metal, photo or all of the mentioned.

It might be of interest, when explaining the positioning of works by artists involved with the handicraft associations, that Bourdieu ignores the possibility that movements on field might be governed by other criteria than men wanting to impress and defeat other men. (Broady 1994) That's old news for a feminist wanting to point to the effects and causes of patriarchal society! (Moi 1994) And its not at all a statement that is contradicting the feminist analysis and not at all deterring utopian claims for a new world order. The Art sociological approach made by Janet Wolff, professor of Art History, is linking the individual achievement to a collective or social production of art. She is simply searching for a profound historical knowledge of feminist actions. (Wolff 1981, 1995)

I have not yet found any satisfactory answers to the questions posed above, which had to do with how the experiment of the expanded field in Klingberg's example would also expand the field of handicraft. Aren't the notions of textile handicraft entangled with femininity to such an extent that it might be appropriate to speak of the gender as genre?

### Gender as Genre?

Looking at textual genre theory, might be an interesting entry for the study of textile art, not only since the etymological roots of text and textile of the contextual study as well as where the words gender and genre coincide. The everyday use of the word has to do with different categories of things. In that sense different arts like literature, music, or visual arts might fall in to separate categories or genres. The term might also be used categorising art and handicraft. In comparing the hierarchical positioning of two genres in this sense, for example Anna Lena Lindberg has been able to detect the shifting notions of femininity as related to the status of the embroidered picture within the Art Academy over a period of time. (Lindberg 2000)

In mainstream history of art when dealing with "genre" it equals above all to the "genre painting". In that particular sense genre is thought of as:

- 1) only valid in terms of motifs, i e everyday scenes
- 2) mainly equal to the lower categories of academic arts, i e all that is *not* aspiring to the supremacy of historical painting, and finally:
- 3) since the overthrowing of the hegemony of the academic arts, the genres landscape, still-life, interiors etc has really become the prime focus of the modern artists' occupation with formal experiment, from realism to surrealism.

In the more extensive writing of genre in literature studies – evolving for some time around the arch-genres of lyric-epic-drama – there has been a discussion of as to whether a Great Work of Art isn't always transgressing any clear cut boundaries, making the categories merely radiating around the least common denominator. (Genette 1979) In art criticism and art historical writing the arch-genres seem to be a more hidden agenda. Nevertheless it has to do with the same hierarchy. Most noticeable in the placing of the most poetic of styles in modernism, the abstract art, dealing only with *l'art pour l'art* clearly at the top.

The etymological connection between 'gender' and 'genre' inspired a lot of books and articles published since the 1980s. In overviews on the literary field this is beginning to show. So is for example David Duff pointing to that exact reason to include an article Mary Eagleton in the anthology *Modern Genre Theory* (2000). The article by Mary Eagleton is reprinted from *Re-reading the Short Story* (1989). She claims that from the beginning "Feminist criticism's primary response to

genre has been to look at it in terms of sexual difference, to try to account for the presence or absence of women in the major genres of the novel, poetry and drama, and to explore further those forms in which women writers are highly represented.” (Eagleton 2000, p 251) Dealing mainly with sexual difference, she is leaving the interesting questions “Should we talk of the female author or feminine writing” and “Can we create a criticism which is non-essentialist, non-reductive but subtly alive to the links between gender and genre?” to the end of the article. (Eagleton 2000, p 260) She is not answering the questions she is posing but leaves them more like manifestations of a wish for a continuing genre theoretical debate.

It might be a though quest to link a feminist criticism to the field theories of Bourdieu. Especially since he might be seen as vehemently opposing to the categorisation referred to as having to do with essential class- and sexual difference. (Moi 1994, p 12) Therefore I was surprised to find that he uses the immanent genre hierarchies to illustrate the results of his study: The shifting status of the poetry – novel – theatre, which by the end of the 1900<sup>th</sup> century. With cultural criteria they were placed in the mention order, but with economic criteria it’s the other way around: theatre comes first, then novel – then poetry. (Bourdieu 1992, p 181) These result categories are consistent with the genres – lyric – epic– drama – into which literature theorists has been putting different kinds of literature, referring to it as an invention by Aristotle, thus eternally valid (?). Can the genres merely be seen as ready-made compartments to put the culture of a given time into? Doesn’t the structure in itself structure the investigation?

In my continuing research the features and artistic activities of the handicraft society may be seen as a field of shared symbolic values. But the division lines between the genres of handicraft and art will be impossible to maintain.

## **Summary/Conclusions**

The title for this paper “Transgressing the borders of textile art, or - Swedish artists as craftsmen?” is really slightly misleading. The artists I have presented are not primarily interested in neither transgressing the borders of textile art nor are they to be seen merely as craftsmen. These preconceived notions, however, points to illustrate two aspects of the Swedish art world that sooner or later will affect artistic practice of the artists associated with the Swedish handicraft associations.

The background being, that Swedish sloyd-, craft-, and handicraft- organisations engaged artists and architects in actions taken for the survival of the vernacular skills from vanishing, the Swedish Artist might be proud of being a Craftsman. I am making the distinction of arts- as compared to crafts largely on an agent-based assumption; if the producer is an artist then the product is art. This overtly simplified view I then further problemize, however, by linking it to the gender biased expectations of women’s behaviour, starting already with the denotation of an artist. The general norm in the magazine *Hemslöjden* being that the majority of the Textile Artists are women and the Folk Artist almost exclusively equals a man, I choose to study men and women engaged in the textile arts compartment. These artists more or less deliberately challenges these notional limitations.

By suggesting an analysis of both the structure and the agents of the fields defined as the social production of arts- and crafts, the study is approaching the complex question of gender and genre.

Swedish textile art is often described as highly successful and as part of an appreciated tradition. But there are some interesting points to be made from looking at the subject as an Art Historian with a gender- and genre-perspective. First of all the textile material is closely linked to notions of femininity. The textile material is also persistently placed within the craft sphere as opposed to the art sphere. Secondly, the textile art scene also consists mainly of women artists. The connection with traditional craft seems to exclude them from the innovative – mainly masculine – modernist art

scene. But not from the concept of modernity as a whole. And what about now? Has there been a post modern implosion of genres?

Genres in the history of art are defined by the subject depicted. Already with the modernist turn when the still-life and the landscape became increasingly popular, there was a turnover of genre hierarchies. Paradoxically the decorative arts such as textile were not even included in this overturn when motifs disappeared in favour of the nonfigurative art. The postmodernist turn enabled in some ways artists previously neglected to raise the vice as the suddenly celebrated other.

What I have been asking myself lately is whether the gender notion is altogether placing textile art in a separate genre, completely 'gendered'. If I return to my examples from the magazine *Hemslöjden* I can easily conclude that, more often than not the artists, dealing with textile, who also happen to be female, are accompanied with a textile- prefix, thus creating a double negative. That double negative might of course be useful in the developing of something new.



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