

Embodied knowledge

Essay by Maria Lind about Åsa Norberg & Jennie Sundén

Don't be surprised if something feels familiar with Åsa Norberg and Jennie Sundén's artwork - that is nothing out of the ordinary. They often and gladly borrow motifs and forms from their predecessors, yes they even establish conversations with other artists, without them necessarily knowing about it. These older artists become a kind of collaborative partner even though they have long been dead and buried. The duo themselves call the resulting works of art "reflections of a role model", but reflections that at the same time mean a new and entirely own interpretation.

Take for example Blanket (acrylic and collage on jeans) from 2018: it has emerged in dialogue with Sonia Delaunay-Terk (1885-1979) and her legendary, proto-cubist, patchwork, sewn in 1911 to the newborn son Charles. Sonia Delaunay-Terk is regarded as a pioneer in abstract art and was a pioneer in the European avant-garde of the 20th century. Inspired by Russian folk art in combination with the modern world, she wanted to introduce the art into everyday life through painting, textiles, furniture, fashion, mosaic, film and theater. The patchwork was directly influenced by textiles she saw with the peasants during her upbringing in a poor Jewish family in a small village outside Odessa, and the pattern can be recognized in her later works. With Norberg and Sundén, the baby blanket is paired with leather handles

from Renate Müller's educational toys and a large drop shape in milk-colored terry, placed far down in the picture, represents the Milk Drop, the predecessor of the Child Welfare Center.

Other “collaborators” are art historical greats such as the Russian constructionist Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958), Bauhaus pioneers Anni (1899–1994) and Josef Albers (1888–1976), Bloomsbury Group’s Vanessa Bell (1879–1961) and Karin Larsson (1859–1928).), the creator of the Carl Larsson farm in Sundborn and model in many of her husband's pictures. They are all artists whose work has more often ended up in clothing and everyday textiles than in the museums' paintings collections. Like the predecessors, the hand is put into intensive work with Norberg and Sundén. Always exquisitely executed with great precision, the works consist of all kinds of expected and unexpected materials. There are oil paint and linen, but also denim fabric, manchester, terry cloth, blanket, cotton ribbon, wood, and granite. One series of images consists only of materials that are included in cleaning articles, and a series of low sculptural platforms contain exclusively those that can be purchased in a hobby shop. In addition to painting, drawing, and collage, the artists embroider, and they also do carpentry and sew applications.

Norberg and Sundén are not alone in highlighting crafts and craftsmanship - it is an important current in contemporary art. If the art of the 21st century was characterized by the presence of the moving image, the

2010s are characterized by an interest in material, technical workmanship and embodied knowledge. More and more artists are learning old craft and craft techniques, reinterpreting traditions and conventions, and being careful about resources. This is undoubtedly a reaction to the dominance of the digital today and at the same time an expression of a willingness to pay attention to phenomena and people who have been forgotten. This attitude is recognized by the British Arts and Crafts movement, which in the late 1800s reacted to the mechanization of the work of the hand by industrialism. Another important attitude was that they refused to accept that artistic expression, such as painting, would be more important, or more worthwhile, than other media, such as ceramics or textiles. For them, art was a sort of "combined arts", which should also belong to everyone.

Combining things, thinking and doing in plural, is part of how Norberg and Sundén make art. Instead of splitting the work between them, one takes on where the other ends, like a baton, so that both are involved in everything they do. Everything is filtered and processed by both of them. It is a method they have developed since they started working together in 2005. They have described it as establishing a kind of zone for "shared thinking", a zone that differs from each work. I have followed them ever since, as students at the Umeå University College of Art, working on a joint drawing project that, with their geometric facade pictures, stood out at the graduation exhibition. Something that constantly shows the duo that they work associatively

but at the same time highly structured. Research and design always go hand in hand - the educational work can even be described as an engine in the work.

Women's struggle through history is another red thread in the artists' work, among other things by studying women's dominant historical contexts such as Svensk Hemslöjd and Nya Idun. People's education and non-profit association activities also interest the duo, especially within the framework of the labor movement. Since 2007, they have jointly run Hit, an exhibition venue in the Majorna district of Gothenburg, where artists such as Falke Pisano, Agnieszka Polska and Laure Prouvost were introduced for the very first time in Sweden. When Norberg and Sundén 2017 were invited to exhibit separately at Göteborgs Konsthall, they immediately sought to break the format's boundaries by inviting some of the artists who have already figured on Hit. In this way, the solo presentation became a dynamic group exhibition, without giving up the opportunity for visitors to experience a number of the duo's work and the working method that underlies them.

In many of Norberg and Sundén's works, the everyday materials appear in clear, abstract forms, preferably designed in dialogue with older artists. Abstract forms of this kind may seem closed but, according to the artists, they say a lot about society and its values. Similarly, everyday aesthetics, which are based on the material environment, by definition always represent time as well as its ideology and politics. The boundaries between art and craft are of special interest to the duo, although they

do not necessarily accept them. Is *The Flax*, which consists of collage and painting on manchester, textile or painting? It is both. With illustrations of, among other things, two book grants belonging to Valfrid Palmgren who started Stockholm's children's and youth library in 1911, painted bands from a photograph from the school's day at the pedagogically progressive Viggbyholmsskolan (1928-1972), an abstract painting of an open fire and school children and their rector from the artist Bart van der Leek's illustration to the Hans Christian Andersen saga *Linnet* from 1941 and a broken square from the pedagogy Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's (1746-1827) writings, the work is a homage to "combined arts" and to the progressive children's pedagogy through the ages.

In later works, Norberg and Sundén have selected comrades as the handicraft enthusiast Lilli Zickerman (1858–1949), reform educators such as Friedrich Fröbel (1782–1852) with the very first Kindergarten, Maria Montessori (1870–1952) and her radical ideas about the child's learning ability. well-planned environments and John Dewey's (1859–1952) pioneering Laboratory School at Chicago University where teaching was based on contact with everyday life outside the school and the school itself provided a sense of warmth and family relationships. Here, the duo is far from alone - since the 1990s, a great interest in radical pedagogy has become increasingly evident in art. In addition to several art projects in the form of schools, academies and universities, such as *The School of Missing Studies*, *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.* and *The Silent University*, it is about

works that in various ways involve learning, education and knowledge production. These art projects and works are so numerous that they have coined the term "the educational turn". Both artists and curators have taken the initiative in the "educational projects" but they are all involved in radical pedagogy, how knowledge is created and how it can be shared.

This "educational turn" has taken place while the formal education in Europe has undergone dramatic changes: the "cram school" has gained new ground, art education has been streamlined and university programs testify to how the relationship between students and professors increasingly resembles that between customers and vendors. In many countries, education has also been charged and privatized - knowledge has become economics, most literally. When the majority society is heading in one direction, most of the arts points in a different direction, as Norberg and Sundén themselves have expressed it. And as their work in this exhibition shows.

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