



Essay

Meaningful Craft: Su san Cohn, Vincent Vulsma, Dan Halter and Vincent Rumahloine

Anthony Bumhira, Dhoyijisi Generation (detail)

Text Jessica Hemmings Published 27 Aug 2020

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In this lecture-cum-essay Jessica Hemmings looks to four different craft practices that challenge the Western-centric craft model

This essay was first delivered by Jessica Hemmings in the format of a public lecture at the [RIAN Design Museum Falkenberg](#), Sweden 12 February 2020. Offered as a starting point for a day-long discussion about the identity of Nordic craft, the talk looked beyond the immediate region to a number of contrasting examples of craft practices in countries such as Australia, Indonesia and Zimbabwe. The lecture was by invitation of the [Nordic Platform for Critical Craft Theory](#), a collaborative initiative between [RIAN Design Museum](#), [Designmuseo Helsinki](#) and Norwegian Crafts. This essay is published as a collaboration between Norwegian Crafts and [Tidsskriftet Kun](#).

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what I BELIEVE IN: HOW DO I FIND THE courage to do this? How do I trust someone I don't know?»

Su san Cohn

In 2018 and 2019, Australian artist Su san Cohn delivered *meaninglessness*, a lecture-performance created with David Pledger at thirty events throughout Denmark in response to the 2016 legislation «requiring any assets over two thousand Australian dollars [10 000 DK], including meaningless jewellery, to be confiscated by the Danish border authorities to subsidise the upkeep of people seeking asylum in Denmark».[i] Clear that she was not interested in condemning Denmark, Cohn instead recognised Australian immigration policy as an alarming role model. With the analogue props of her jeweller's tools and a slide projector, she moved the skill and labour of her Melbourne workshop out into a public forum that described several generations of her family's migration. Cohn then voiced a set of difficult questions: «How do I stand up for something that I believe in? How do I find the courage to do this? How do I trust someone I don't know?»[ii]

The challenging questions Cohn asks of her practice find diverse responses in examples of contemporary craft practices and collaborations that may be unfamiliar to craft discourse in the Nordic region. But attention to international examples of practices which consider immigration, the value of labour and the importance of community alongside aesthetic considerations are, to my mind, crucial for our understanding of the purpose of contemporary craft – both locally as well as internationally – particularly in the midst of the economic inequalities exacerbated by the fraught politics of our current times. As artist and curator Asmudjo Irianto warned me during a conversation in Bandung at the beginning of this year, «In economies where labour is cheap, making things slowly by hand is not valuable. The quality of work continues to decrease because there is a lack of appreciation from our society towards so-called folk or traditional handicraft. It then becomes a kind of vicious circle.»[iii] Acknowledgement of the diverse reception craft receives around the world can assist our understanding of craft practices within the Nordic region and beyond.

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Su san Cohn during the Meaninglessness performance

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Vincent Vulsma, installation photo from the exhibition 'In the Hold' at Hotel Maria Kapel, 2018

Dutch artist Vincent Vulsma acknowledges his «dependence on other people for the materialisation of work».[iv] *Return* (2017 – ongoing) refers to the brutal cycle that traded enslaved Africans westward across the Atlantic to work on cotton and indigo plantations, on the same ships which then transported the plantation's raw materials on eastbound journeys to manufacturing. Observing first-hand the labour-intensive extraction process of indigo, Vulsma works to create a pause in another relentless circulation: the contemporary art market. He commissions solid blocks of indigo to be produced by plantation workers in India and remunerates their labour with funding from his artist's fee from each new exhibition invitation of *Return*. Under the terms he stipulates for the project, the same indigo block cannot simply be recycled in a future exhibition context. Instead, a new commission triggers another order of indigo that intentionally «goes against the logic of contemporary art circulation».[v] Vulsma not only foregrounds the labour of others behind his work but has created a system that protects opportunities to continue commissions with the indigo planta-

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In contrast to Vulsma's work with indigo, Zimbabwean artist Dan Halter describes his deliberately chosen materials as ubiquitous and often collaborates to find the fabrication skills necessary for

Empire (2019) series, for example, recreates Britain's flag from found woven plastic bags. Zimbabwe was one of the last British colonies to gain independence and the title loosely translates from Afrikaans as «stuff» or «fuck» empire. More than forty years on Halter refers instead to the neo-colonial era of the world today, where economic inequalities drawn along colonial lines have remained. Like Vulsma, Halter acknowledges his need for others to materialise his work. Since 2005, he has worked with Bienco Boketsu Ikete, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who is now Halter's full-time studio assistant. The two men met in Cape Town where Ikete was «working as a car guard. His family from the Congo have since joined him in Cape Town.»[vi] Three fellow Zimbabweans also assist Halter with specific materials: the seamstress Sibongile Tete (who stitched *Footsack Empire*); Kuda Kuimba, a bead and wire-worker; and Faro Mutize, a Shona stone sculptor.



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Vincent Rumahloine, Museum Warga Pulosari

Photo — Djuli Pamungkas

Where Vulsma and Halter conceive of projects that intentionally look to involve the material expertise of others, Indonesian artist Vincent Rumahloine takes yet another approach. When Rumahloine graduated from Bandung Institute of Technology's (ITB) ceramic programme in 2009, he saw that «the contemporary art scene in Bandung was really driven by the market.»^[vii] Aware that his ceramic practice was not particularly commercial, he decided instead to begin work as an art school teacher. To develop his creative practice, he set about creating his own art residencies by following the guidelines of opportunities he saw online and applying them to his local community.

Rumahloine likens his experience of the pinching and hand building techniques he originally chose for his coursework with the community-focused social practice he has since developed. Repeated visits to local homes allowed Rumahloine to work on projects that take as their starting point the interests and needs of the local community: «personal connections are like handprints in clay – but

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In the *Moving Museum* series, Rumahloine creates temporary museums of objects on loan from local residents displayed in structures the community has built collectively. «Borrowing objects for

far from the communities he works with when creating iterations of the *Moving Museum*.^[ix] The expenses necessary to bring his version of the *Museum* to life, such as timber for the structure, are modest. But details such as wiring the *Museum* with a warm light bulb instead of cold fluorescent light help to signal a different atmosphere inside the temporary space. As a result, the volunteer construction workers who assist in making the structures have the opportunity to see their skills contributing to the creation of a space that is more than practical. Simple decisions such as the type of lightbulb set the space apart from the familiar neighbourhood kiosks and suggest attention and respect for a site that is both conceived for the community and filled with objects on loans of trust from the community. As a result, the *Moving Museums* and those who participate in their creation are valued by the community and their skills acknowledged in a new context. At the conclusion of each iteration of the museum, timber is recycled in a project chosen by the local community: first a doghouse, and more recently a children's playground.

In different ways, Vincent Vulsma, Dan Halter and Vincent Rumahloine each embody the challenge Su san Cohn set for her own practice to «find a voice to ask a better set of questions».^[x] Cohn concluded each *meaninglessness* event with a gift and request list that includes actions such as «listen more, speak less» offered to every audience member, a material gesture that «binds us together».^[xi] Vulsma, Halter and Rumahloine offer their own particular approaches to the responsibilities encountered in the exchange of material goods. Acknowledgement of the needs, as well as the interests, of specific communities is crucial if we are not only to remember the stark differences craft faces around the world but also attempt to make a meaningful contribution to a global dialogue about craft. If we are to think internationally when we refer to contemporary craft – as I think it is only responsible to do – then it becomes irresponsible to avoid acknowledgement of these economic, but also cultural, differences.

One final example of how definitions of craft are navigated outside the Nordic region emerged recently in a dialogue at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa when the artist Anthony Bumhira responded to a question from the audience about how artists in Zimbabwe support themselves financially. Bumhira explained that he was taught to use two different names: two professional identities allowed him to invest considerable production time in large textile works, without

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scribes yet another practical reality of craft – a professional duality that exists in many regions but is rare to hear acknowledged. While few provide such stark evidence as Bumhira shared, Cohn, Vulsma, Halter and Rumahloine each offer us provocative models of contemporary craft that take

ing the public and an audience as spaces of trust, as Cohn and Rumahloine work, are strategies that ensure the meaningfulness of craft.

[i] Su san Cohn, *meaninglessness*. [Watch on Youtube here.](#)

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Asmudjo J. Irianto, conversation with the author, 27 January 2020.

[iv] Jessica Hemmings “Navigating Cultural Threads” Tilburg TextielMuseum, 2018, p. 13.[v] Ibid. p. 15.

[vi] Dan Halter, email correspondence with the author, 28 April 2020. Halter is IASPIS International Artist in Residence (Stockholm) in 2021.

[vii] Vincent Rumahloine, email correspondence with the author, 4 February 2020.

[viii] Ibid.

[ix] Vincent Rumahloine skype with the author 14 February, 2020.

[x] Su san Cohn, *meaninglessness*

[xi] Ibid.

[xii] Anthony Bumhira passed away in January 2020. For a full record of the public dialogue see *Material Matters in Paintings at the End of an Era* dialogue with Anthony Bumhira, Jessica Hemmings and Hayden Proud chaired by Erica de Greef at Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town, South Africa, December 2 2018. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14759756.2020.1738318>

[xiii] Ibid.

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