

## Materialising the Workshop

*'The painter Edgar Degas is once supposed to have remarked to Stéphane Mallarmé, "I have a wonderful idea for a poem but I can't seem to work it out," whereupon Mallarmé replied, "My dear Edgar, poems are not made with ideas, they are made with words."'*<sup>1</sup>

### Day 1

#### *Beginning*

A hand deftly holds a wooden spoon and stirs a hot chili. It contains butter beans, baked sweet potato, peppers and coriander. A moveable table set for eight people is slowly laden with plates of food. Eaten, the plates are carried to the kitchen and loaded into the dish washer.

Another hand picks a small piece of Plasticine from a bag on the floor and decisively sticks it to the wall. It is yellow and contrasts with the roller painted grey wall. The gesture requires no explanation. Mouths open and close but other words of weather/what they enjoy cooking/artistic survival, flow between the group. Another hand squeezes a lump of Plasticine into a sausage shape and connects it to the yellow splodge. Slowly the wall recedes as a synthetic growth of yellow blue, purple and green creeps across its pristinely renovated surface.

### Day 2

#### *Shopping around*

The space is a confusion of purposes and aesthetics. The vast volume of Smedjegatan 10 tells of its former industrial energy, a factory once connected to the global company - *Atlas Copco* known for its manufacturing of industrial tools. Now its rough surfaces are cleaned, precisely plastered while decommissioned equipment hangs mid-air like formal sculptures. Spot lighting emphasises the setting, recasting the eight as actors around a table awaiting their stage cue. This time they are eating breakfast wraps with baked kidney beans, scrambled eggs, chimichurri, avocado, sour cream and pickled red onion. A fork gathers some cucumber and carrot salad that sits in a large bowl at the centre of the table.

Like many former industrial spaces this building is now owned by Atrium Ljungberg a huge real-estate company that has transformed the area into a shopping quarter - Sickla Köpkvarter. Production has left the building and consumers, rather than workers, enter. Up until 2014 the person visiting might have perused furniture made far away, brought to Stockholm for sale here. Since yesterday another type of customer walks around the polished concrete floor, feet of artists interminably tied to the narratives of production and consumerism.

### Day 3

#### *Desirable objects*

When approaching the entrance to Smedjegatan 10 you cross light beams cast through large vacant windows. The repurposed architectural openings no longer seek to draw light into illuminate industrial machinations. Now, the vacuous empty rooms radiate a bright daylight of electrical bulbs, spotlighting potential clients walking past.

Protected from the rain, a face presses to the glass observing two artists inside talking. They are pointing at a large grey column. The face imagines their slow conversation. Words of..., *'do you think that works there...?' '...concrete polystyrene!' '...connections to the steel infrastructure...'* pass between their lips. Looking at the artists again, the face discovers one has changed clothing.

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<sup>1</sup> Sennett Richard, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 119.

They now wear a shirt and trousers and their paint scuffed Nike trainers have become polished shoes. Still pointing at the object the face looks at the column again. In the place of the polystyrene sculpture is an elegant book shelf made in light ash. Their voices are quicker, less conversational and the suited character encouragingly slides his hand down the side of the furniture, his fingertips sensitively reading the wood surface.

Day 4

#### *Grasping collaboration*

In Richard Sennett's book *Together* he discusses the physical movements within an artist workshop. How people working together there could seemingly alert their colleagues without verbal expression when they were needing help, when they needing to move out of the way, or, (as I like to embellish) when one needs a cup of tea. Sennett describes the importance of physical communication, in which, 'bodily gestures take the place of words in establishing authority, trust and cooperation.'<sup>2</sup>

Although an iPod is plugged into speakers atop a ladder, Smedjegatan 10 is generally quiet. The expanse of the space allows voices to go unheard and noise made from materials bending, stretching, falling or breaking offers the comforting knowledge of activity, of someone at work close by. The artists in this ensemble are a mix of friends, colleagues and strangers. With the motivation of creating something visual, of creating an installation together, and with the temporality of 60 hours, verbal communication is substituted for physical making; thoughts are materialised through doing. Conversation could be said to be transferred, instead, occurring between the materials; occurring among their manipulations.

Sennett discusses that muscular control and bodily gesture is not only a communicator but establishes a tonal quality that nurtures informal social relationships between people<sup>3</sup>; physical language invites openness, cooperation and collaboration. Equally in his earlier book *The Craftsman* he asks, 'Is there some bodily basis for working cooperatively?'<sup>4</sup>

Collaboration is a burdened term often linked to visions of long-term working. It can suggest years of intimate discussions where one's identity is subsumed under the shared collective and where the emphasis is on ideas rather than making. Yet, does this complicate and limit what working together can be?

A wooden beam, long and precariously see-sawing on the axis of an artist's hip is quickly grasped by another. Together they hoist the beam and link it through hanging wires, silently supporting the weight whilst the other secures the structure in place. The beam is attached to a rope that loops its way from the horizontal brushing the floor gently by only a few hairs of its jute. Stepping back the two engage in conversation, thinking through what new perspective this moon-shaped sculpture brings to the emerging installation.

Day 5

#### *Habits of the hand*

Before the meeting of mouths took place over carefully created soba noodle salad (with cucumber, carrots and spring onions), there was a meeting of materials. Each artist asked for, or brought with them particular supplies for the others to work with. Mounds of cardboard, plaster, ropes, clamps, wire, paint, pigment, mesh, tubes, polystyrene, gold and white fabric are now placed next to the kitchen. Hands gather the raw ingredients and drag, carry or wheel what appeals across to a suitable work area. Each pair of hands carries distinct knowledge. How to bend cardboard so it

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<sup>2</sup> Sennett Richard, *Together* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 119.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Sennett Richard, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 161.

might stand without other support, how to slice seitan so to absorb its marinade, how to daub plaster to look like whipped cream, how to fix materials together without the use of glue or screws.

Sennett, discusses a worker's material consciousness as a marked engagement propelled by our curiosity at how a material can change.<sup>5</sup> Yet, to enact change an artist requires a tool. Whilst saws, knives, drills, paint brushes and screw drivers litter the room, hands are primarily employed. They discover and learn the material's pleasures and possibilities as cuts and folds, charcoal and rubber penetrate and spoil surfaces. Sennett discusses the complex intellect of the hand reflecting on Charles Bell's (religiously) staunch belief that, 'the brain receives more trustworthy information from the touch of the hand than images in the eye.'<sup>6</sup>

Whilst smells of today's tomato, artichoke, red wine and parmesan pasta bleed from the open kitchen door, glands in the mouth salivated over the other inedible ingredients. Rather than pondering, or thinking through how to cook up something that might evoke equally as physical seduction as the activity in the kitchen, hands led the way to playfully combine elements. Fingers tips running over too familiar surfaces would stop to listen to other hands as they showed ways of working with unaccustomed components. As Sennett discovers, the cooperative language developed through material sharing rests on the principle that what guides, 'one practice can be applied to quite another activity.'<sup>7</sup> One material method becomes mutated and morphed, as another hand adopts the technique. At the other side of the room the clamping of a polystyrene block to two wood struts migrates to fasten streams of synthetic hair to a growing wall collage.

Day 6

*Material pleasure and a party*

The activity; the cooking, the creating, the eating, the carrying; the hours shared together at Smedjegatan 10 is tied under the heading *Collage Party*. Two words that tell of material and pleasure. A collage has a hand-made, temporal quality, it carries the excitement of speed, of grabbing materials at hand. Yet, it also suggests an air of authority, a demand to be taken seriously even if indeed only present as a fleeting composition.

A hand circles a marker pen balanced between a screw and a two-inch wood length. The sculpture's visual expression defies its material properties. The pen's weight is seemingly off-set by the artist's imagination. Seductive and simple, the act like that of the earlier Plasticine encounter needs no verbal explanation. However, both occasions need a body, a body to bring movement, perspective and tactility, a body that draw contrasts and coherences with the other materials.

Walking across the room the sound of a leaf blower comfortingly ushers air into gigantic plastic sausages which raise and lower like lungs. Looking around, the factory has been taken over by a forest of fabric gold: it is clogged with charcoal cars and sheltered by serrated screens. In one corner the artists congregate, relaxed and smiling they describe the week as luxurious. Not only did it provide materials to speak to each other through, it also gave each artist time. Time to collage and time to party.

This text is written by Jenny Richards in response to *Collage Party* a show created collaboratively on-site by Hrafnhildur Arnardottir / Shoplifter, Jan Matsson, Jonas Nobel, Nanna Nordström, Roger von Reybekiel, Anna Rokka, Bella Rune and Jun-Hi Wennergren Nordling. Starting from scratch this exhibition was the spontaneous outcome of a one-week long shared production process, November 2015.

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<sup>5</sup> Sennett Richard, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 149.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid: 150

<sup>7</sup> Ibid: 126