

Magnhild Øen Nordahl

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The Fall and Rise of The Workshop

During an 8 days introductory course in the wood workshop at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm we were told the creepy story about a crazy Finnish art student who many years ago was working in the workshop alone at night and deliberately chopped his hand off. After this self-amputation he proceeded to put the hand in the microwave to make sure it could not be stitched back on. The story made me, and I think some of my fellow students, all feel heavy with the responsibility we were given; getting the chance to work alone with big machines in spite of the potential that we could turn into suicidal lunatics. We were offered the trust not only to operate the machines ourselves, but even expected to help change saw blades, carry material in from delivery and do simple equipment maintenance. The way that Annette Felleson ran the wood workshop in this school has ever since been the gold standard for me when thinking about how such a facility should ideally be organized to allow a practice lead artistic development with trust and individual guidance from peers who had time to show you if not today, then at least tomorrow. Unfortunately, since I started my art education 14 years ago these kinds of workshops have become a rare sighting and it has become increasingly difficult to have the workshop as your main place for learning and becoming an artist.

As a young art student today it is overwhelming how many barriers you have to overcome before being allowed to work with machines. My current place of work seems representative for many other places I have visited. You can access the workshops and use the machines from 8.30-15.00 Monday to Friday. Except the one hour lunch break. Except when they are in a meeting. Except when you are waiting in line because there are so many others who need help. Etcetera, etcetera. In the meanwhile you can just forget about making that artwork for that exhibition even if it is another 2 months down the road. All of this speaks to the fact that when decisions are made on how to run a school the value of workshop experience counts less than the more easily countable costs of workshop staff and risks of injuries. The question does not seem to be “how can we make the workshops accessible?”, it is rather “how can we make them cheaper and less dangerous?” A simple answer to the latter is just to reduce access for the students. This phenomenon is particularly problematic when preparing people for a profession in which making objects for many is a central part of the activity, however it is not an occurrence exclusive to art education. Taking Norway as an example arts and crafts education in primary school (barneskole og ungdomskole) has been subject to budget cuts, facilities are being downsized and skilled teachers are not prioritized in hiring processes. This disregard for the learning experiences from the workshop prevails

through higher education across disciplines such as for instance chemistry and physics where students spend less time doing lab work or in architecture where physical building is replaced by digital 3D-modeling.

It therefore seems to me an interesting paradox that we in the west simultaneously see a growing DIY-trend with people wanting to make things themselves and as a result the growth of a global maker movement. A makerspace is a public workshop where people can come together and form communities around shared tools and knowledge. This trend is facilitated by new communication technology and cheaper tools, allowing people to share their 3D designs online and turn them into physical products at home or in their local makerspace. This can be seen in context with what American economist Jeremy Rifkin talks about as a third industrial revolution¹, where production is decentralized and consumers have a higher degree of decision-making power, produce what they need themselves and share it on online markets. The Center for Bits and Atoms was one of the first makerspaces and it was started at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2001 to explore the intersection of the digital and physical worlds². One of the center's early projects was the FabLab which has become a global network of open workshops for making, prototyping and inventing for students, professionals and non-professionals.

This, alongside the workshops of The Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm, was one of the inspiration sources when I co-founded Aldea Center for Contemporary Art, Design and Technology in Bergen in 2018 together with Cameron MacLeod. Largely based on used equipment from the National Academy of the Arts Norway, we created open workshops for work with wood, metal and digital fabrication with the primary goal to provide production facilities for the creative workers in the region. Despite the fact that our workshop is set up mainly for post-graduates we do on occasion have enrolled students or even teachers who come and work with us when the internal boundaries of the school seem too great to overcome. It is not obvious whether the weakening of the institutional workshop and the simultaneous rise of the informal workshop is an odd coincidence or part of a larger system of causes and effects, and it remains to be seen if these differently organized workshops will continue to be separate, if they will somehow cross paths or if one will eventually replace the other. In either case I believe that the workshop will continue to exist in one form or another as an indispensable site for becoming an artist.

¹ Rifkin, Jeremy, *The Third Industrial Revolution*, (2011, Palgrave MacMillan)

² Center for Bits and Atoms, "About", *The Center for Bits and Atoms*, <http://cba.mit.edu/about/index.html> Accessed 5. Aug. 2019.