

Kamilla Freyr

ON CRAFTSMANSHIP, CONTEMPORARY ART AND A CAR ON ITS TRAVELS

Kamilla Freyr is a PhD candidate in philosophical aesthetics at the University of Uppsala. As a researcher, she is particularly interested in philosophy as a reflective practice addressing contemporary art and art communication. In this interview, she speaks to Furniture Upholsterer Eddie King and some of his partners, who built the *Migrant Car*.

“Where does a work in public space really take place?”

—DORA GARCÍA¹

In the course of the summer of 2019, the sculptural work *Migrant Car* can be found somewhere in Oslo’s car-free zone – an immigrant and visitor to a city that is attempting to free itself of cars. This is the story of a car on its travels, an ongoing conversation with three craftsmen who took up the challenge of contemporary art.

In Delhi and Kochi

The story of *Migrant Car* starts on the streets of Delhi. In 2012, the British Indian artist Ed D’Souza came across a crashed Hindustan Ambassador, a car with a long and interesting history. In 1957, ten years after India won its freedom from British colonial rule, production of the car was taken over by the Indian firm Hindustan Motors. Despite its British origins – where the model went under the name of the Morris Oxford – the immigrant soon became a popular car, and is still known as ‘the King of the Indian Road.’ For the artist, the wrecked car stood as a symbol of postcolonial history and the fall of the British Empire, and he began to investigate the car through what he calls photographic records. He captured images that depicted not only the car’s gradual obsolescence, but also expressions of local creativity as the car became covered with more and more graffiti.² Ed wanted to give this photo-documentary a sculptural form and contacted the local furniture upholsterer David Jose in Delhi, who built a model of the car and covered it with textile prints of

¹ The artist Dora García asked this question in her lecture “Dynamiting the notion of the context-free, punctually-operating individual artist: Working with the collective, the durational, and the site specific” during the osloBIENNALEN FIRST EDITION 2019-2024 Prologue Symposium on 27.5.19.

² The artist later found out that the graffiti had been created by the recognized Indian street artist Daku.

the photographs D'Souza had taken. The wreck was brought back to life and dispatched on a new journey. It also became a readymade – a found object modified and recontextualized as a work of art. The piece was exhibited in Delhi in 2012 under the title *Economic Juggernaut*³, and then again as part of India's first biennale – the Kochi-Muziris biennale – in 2014, this time with the title *End of Empire*. Both times the car was recreated by local craftsmen, so that the work was modified in response to the context of each place and the individuals involved.

At Grünerløkka

In 2019, its journey brought it to Oslo as an Indian immigrant, where the car was again recreated by the craftsmen Eddie King, Ronny Karlsen and Kristian Rosskopf in Eddie King's upholstery workshop – a former plaster-casting factory at Grünerløkka. This is where Eddie lives and works alongside his wife, the glass artist Lene Middelthon, who exhibits her pieces at one end of the workshop. This is more than a workshop, it is a meeting place – Grünerløkka in miniature – where people come and go at any hour. "I open when I arrive – and close when I leave," says a sign on the door.

When the upholsterer was recommended to Ed by the osloBIENNALEN production manager, he quickly realized that these were exactly the craftsmen and the workshop he needed. Eddie, who loves insects and as a child "dreamed of becoming a David Attenborough," was born in Trinidad, but grew up in New York before coming to Norway in 1978. Kristian grew up in Munich but had a grandmother in Majorstuen, Oslo. He moved to Norway in 1991 and worked in travel agencies before he began to earn a living as a cabinetmaker. Ronny, who is now training to become a carpenter, but is already a locksmith, a technical inspector and a former expert witness for the Norwegian CID, must be considered the most settled of the three: "If I ever have to move away from Grünerløkka, I will have to move away from Norway," he laughs.

He belongs to a third generation of neighbourhood craftsmen and has lived there all his life. Although it is Eddie who runs the workshop, Ronny and Kristian often help with cabinetmaking work and furniture repairs. When the two are out on other jobs, they are always sure to round off the working day with a beer at Eddie's. As three of the very few independent craftsmen left in Oslo, in many ways these men personify the history of Grünerløkka – a neighbourhood with a long-standing tradition of industry and craft. D'Souza decided to place the car's production process on view to the public, making his project a continuation of this local history. The upholstery workshop has big windows onto the street, so work on the car was put on display so that passers-by could follow the process from beginning to end.

One of the conversations I have with Eddie takes place beside boiling pans of potatoes, as he makes reindeer stew with Lene and a friend in the flat behind the workshop. The stew is in honour of the artist and other partners who are coming to dinner later on. "After almost three weeks 'on display' it feels as if the whole of Grünerløkka knows about *The Migrant Car*. I take it as a mark of quality that all the children who have dropped in love it – they have played with it, climbed on it and drawn on it – and refuse to leave when it is time for their parents to take them home," says Eddie.

3 In 2012 the work was shown as part of the solo exhibition "A Show Outside India". Documentation of the work was also shown at Tate Modern in London in 2018.



Ed D'Souza, *Migrant Car* in Oslo Pride, June 2019

When a friend drew a smiley face on the car, Eddie decided to give anyone who came in a felt marker so they could all mark the car in their own way – children as well as adults. When I ask Lene about the reactions they have had to the project, she replies that I'll have to ask Eddie about that: "There have been so many people here that I've stopped listening to what they say," Lene laughs.

The overwhelming interest is also evident on Facebook, where friends and acquaintances have regularly documented the process. Lene and Eddie are also the main subjects of a long article in the latest edition of the street magazine =Oslo, where they are described as local celebrities. So when osloBIENNALEN speaks of the production of the *Migrant Car* as a celebration of the local community at Grünerløkka, it seems to be true.

I ask Eddie why he was prepared to take on the project. He replies that he thought it seemed like an amusing job that would force him 'out of the box'.

"I have had to apply everything I know about upholstery," says the man who has worked in the trade for over 30 years. Early on in the process he was particularly worried about the cloth and how he could work with it. For example, what would it be like to sew by hand?

"Incidentally, Ed was delighted when he heard how we wanted to build the car. In India, the car apparently collapsed when it stood outside, because it was made of cardboard boxes covered in a material that was not waterproof."

There are high hopes for the street party that is to be held on the launch day, when the car parts are to be assembled in the workshop's back yard and the car is to be handed over to the Biennale.

"Although I'm an atheist, I'm tempted to pray to higher powers for good weather on that day," chuckles Eddie.

One early morning, while Eddie is still asleep, I have a cup of coffee with Ronny and Kristian.

"We've done a lot of furniture over the years, but this is something quite different. I hate to be pigeonholed and I'm fascinated with trying out new things and doing new types of work," says Ronny.

To the question of whether they had any relationship with art before, Ronny replies that he has some paintings hanging at home. "My father-in-law painted some really fine pictures. He was clever. But otherwise I have no relationship with art." Kristian, however, describes himself as "super-interested in art."

"I'm particularly interested in art as a means of communication. For what is art actually? Is it a game? It isn't just coming along with a painting or a picture? It tells a story about the person who made it, for example. And while you look at it one way, Ronny looks at it a different way. You should see how desperate Ronny gets when I start seeing things in the walls," he laughs. With a nod of acknowledgement Ronny adds that where he just sees walls, Kristian sees pictures. "But Ronny is getting ever more creative, you know. When he starts seeing Mexicans in the masonry, I suppose you can say he is on the road to improvement," he laughs.

What do you think about people outside the art world taking active part in a contemporary work of art?

"I feel quite certain that the solutions will be different when craftsmen, not only artists, are involved in making art. As craftsmen we go straight for practical solutions: How can this be used? Is it solid enough? When Ed showed us the pictures and the video from India and we understood that the first car was made from cardboard boxes and plastic foam, and that it was transported on a trolley, we decided we had to make a full-scale car that could roll. And from then on the discussions piled up: Should we perhaps make a door, put a seat in the front, make a steering wheel, put hub caps on it? Yes, it really piled up here," he laughs.

"One of the funniest things about this process is that Ed has given us such a free hand. The only thing we couldn't change was the shape of the Ambassador and the material," says Kristian.

"But then that's also the way we are used to working," says Ronny. "Even though a customer may have ideas about how a room should be divided up, or a wall should be set up, we're the ones who come up with the practical solutions. How we tackle the job is up to us," he says.

Kristian sees the freedom that the artist gives the craftsmen as an important part of the artistic concept: "And with that, professional competition comes into the picture. OK, so in India they solved it with plastic foam and cardboard boxes, but here we bloody well had to do it better." They look at each other and have a good laugh.

"Yes, we can't deny that. Of course not! You want to do better, and that's presumably also part of what makes this an ongoing project. From the first day we agreed that we had to do something that would make those who came after us try even harder. We wanted to give them a nut to crack," chuckles Ronny.

"And on top of all the rest comes the street party and everything that goes with it. In this case, it's quite simply a totality that has to be outdone," Kristian adds.



Ed D'Souza, *Migrant Car*

They are both looking forward to seeing how this might happen if there is a next time.

What do you think about Ed viewing this project in relation to the migration theme?

"I like his thinking very much," says Ronny. "As I see it, this is first and foremost a way of getting to know about others. True, we're not going off to India to say hello to the craftsmen there, but I've seen Ed's video and the street scene there, and I've read some of what he's written. And I think it's very interesting. I feel there's a lot to learn from this – and I like that. I must admit that I haven't felt much like travelling to India before, but now I feel very keen on the idea. I want to see the people and the life there – and the car itself 'live,' of course. If you're willing to think it through, this is a project that brings a lot with it." For Kristian, the title is one of the most interesting things: "After all, it could be about something to do with biology, because foreign bodies can be immigrants, as well as people who come from different places. And then you have that bit about migration and how different nations and languages come about. Yes, there's really a lot to this business!" he concludes.

To other places

On the opening day, Eddie's prayer has been answered. When he, Ronny, Kristian and Ed take the *Migrant Car* down to Myntgata – the bonnet full of children – they are accompanied by sunshine for most of the way. With a police escort in front and a parade of friends and acquaintances trailing after, it is exactly the party they hoped for. In the morning, they hold a party for the neighbours in the street in front of the workshop with all sorts of activities including acrobatics and a fire show with Løkka Tigers Turn and Tøyen Sports Club, go-kart racing, a skating competition organized by the Oslo Skateboard Club, and a Masala Magic cooking course.

Thanks to three craftsmen at Grünerløkka, a crashed car off the streets of Delhi has been found a new home in the context of Norwegian Social Democracy – and this time it really feels as if everyone is involved.

The car has departed, but the workshop activities continue with the Biennale logo, a vinyl text and films in the windows that document production both in Kochi and Grünerløkka.⁴ The furniture upholstery workshop carries on as a monument to the activities of the last few months. The car's journey continues too. In the summer of 2019, students and 'car attendants' from the Oslo National Academy of the Arts and OsloMet will pull *The Migrant Car* around in Oslo's car-free zone, bringing it to various projects and events, all of which have something to do with migration and the city. Among other things,

the car will appear in this year's Pride Parade. The public can track its progress on the Oslo Biennale website. Now it remains to be seen whether the Indian immigrant will function as the means of communication that Kristian expressed interest in. In the project "All of Norway is Talking" the car has been identified as one of the most divisive topics currently discussed by Norwegians⁵, and perhaps *The Migrant Car* takes a sidelong glance at the privileged situation that the capacity to close the city to traffic represents. Or perhaps it will draw attention to the benefits of car-free places around the city where a diverse community of different ethnicities can come together.

A crashed Hindustan Ambassador found on the streets of Delhi travels on as an idea that rematerializes in the hands of local craftsmen in different countries. The meaning of the work changes over time in different situations and different places. The artist works with local craftsmen, local materials and in local communities where people become involved in a contemporary art project and acquire part-ownership of it. At the heart of the *Migrant Car* project is Ed D'Souza's keen interest in cooperation and coproduction. As the poet Charles Baudelaire put it: "It is not given to everyone to take a bath in a multitude – enjoying a crowd is an art.

"One of the first things Ed said to us was that *The Migrant Car* was meant to bring people together," says Eddie during one of our conversations, "and it does."

⁴ The film that documents the process in Kochi, "Dave", was made by Robert Ed D'Souza, while the film which documents the process at Grünerløkka was made by Åshild Kristensen Foss, Ingrid Granrud Skaaret and Carina Marwell Hansen (students from the Department of Aesthetic Studies, OsloMet).

⁵ *Morgenbladet* nr. 1, 2019.

