

The Box

Artistic research during Covid-19 lockdown

November 2020: The cutting mat resembles the scarred walls of a slate stone quarry. The angle ruler is not in mint condition either. This is not a time for buying, travelling or mingling with other people, however. The perils of virus contamination make us hover over our laptops, we are frozen in a work mode where nothing seems to not move a millimeter. No-one remembers the previous day, not to mention last week. Hungry for sensory input I close my laptop and remove a few pieces of paper, a strand of hair, some grains of dust from the surface of my wooden desk in the middle of what used to be our living room, for the time being we live, work and try to mimick leisure activity in this 15 square meter room.

Pencils get a treat with the sharpener; luckily we still have quite a few. My eraser gets a the scrub in a long time. The long metal ruler is carefully maneuvered up on the bench without overturning excess objects in the surroundings around me.

My husband has managed to supply me with a cardboard plate from his job, it almost as big as myself from his workplace. I swing the swaying, wobbly thing down on the cutting plate. With a ruler and pencil I measure up a square, 30 centimeters by 30 centimeters. The wallpaper knife is dull, I break the tip off. The metal ruler is gently pressed towards the surface of the cardboard. The hand holding the ruler needs to provide a steady grip. If the pressure is too feeble the ruler will slide out of direction and the knife will leave its destined route along the marked pencil line. If the pressure is too hard, the ruler can leave marks on the cardboard surface.

My eyes are fixed to the sharp point of the knife as it eats its way into the cardboard surface. Carefully I lift a corner, and a gap widens up between the two surfaces. There is a completely clear wound edge, no tiles, no cracks into the cardboard.

I measure: There must be a margin of at least five centimeters. The measurements are checked with the triangle ruler. The angles are correct. Four lines now run parallel to each side of the square. Therefore, each corner now has its own small square. These are each given a diagonal, so the small squares are divided in two triangles. One on each corner are cut off.

The bone folder pressed onto the cardboard surface creates embossed lines on top and bottom sides of the cardboard plate. Now I may gently bend it, a slight change of angle step by step. I must not go about it too abruptly, risking the fibers in the cardboard may break. Yet it must be done firmly enough to produce an angle. As protection to the cutting mat I place small scraps of paper to avoid glued parts sticking to it. The glue is applied with a brush and must have exactly the right consistence, neither too thick nor too watery, to hold the surfaces together. Now the four diagonal corners may be bent towards the folded edges. With metal clips I firmly keep the corners together for a few minutes until the glue has hardened sufficiently to keep the shape of the box together.

I grasp the box in my hand, feeling how the fingers may keep a firm grip in a comfortable way. The hand should be able to easily reach inside and retrieve the content. The surface material should afford the hand holding it without leaving fingerprints. It should be easy to keep clean, not easily contract dust and dirt. I could dress it with textile. I may use bookbinder shirting. But I want this particular box to look unpretentious, yet reliable. Metal is solid. That would not be a wrong signal; a box that would provide the contents protection. But a metal surface in our climate is uncomfortable to touch. Metal boxes can be difficult to open.

Weight would be an issue for a wooden box. Balsa wood is the exception that confirms the rule. Think of cigar boxes, for example. But balsa does not seem right for this purpose, it would feel too light. Cardboard is fine. But cardboard boxes must be chosen carefully. If the fibers are too loosely composed, the edges of the box will not bend well. The thickness of the cardboard must appear right for the size of the box.

I'm making another box, slightly bigger. This one seems optically more harmonious. I make yet another, just as wide and just as long, but a little deeper. The box should not feel too light nor too heavy. It must enclose its content to that prevent the objects from rolling around at the bottom. Neither must it be too narrow, it would make it difficult to lift the content out of the box. Finally, it must not be too deep. The light should be allowed to reach down to the bottom and illuminate the contents.

I pick up a new cardboard plate and put the last box down on the surface, so it has a little margin around it, maybe six, seven centimeters. I control the measurements of the box and add a little margin for the thickness of the cardboard. Then I repeat the same procedure once more. I measure, I cut, I fold and I glue. The box is put to rest for a bit before I turn it around and carefully try to slid it onto the other box. But it does not quite fit. Why? The measurements were wrong. New measurements taken. The thickness of the carton slightly affects the proportions of the box. I make a new lid, but this new lid is not much of an improvement. Frustrated I push it aside and clean up the equipment. That's enough for today.

As I gradually sink into the abyss of dreams visions of boxes keep appearing in front of me. A box can convey and conceal. A box can protect or preserve. The funeral coffin is the final box, designed to give shelter during the process of making us part of the surrounding dust.