

6 CONCLUSION

Work, practice, and site: three words that contemporary art would have a tough time getting along without. Anything made by an artist can be a work; anything an artist does can be a practice; and anywhere this happens can be a site. This lack of definition is indispensable in today's climate of polymorphic production. The traditional genres (landscape, portrait, still life, vessel) and media (painting, pottery, photography) that once imposed order on artistic production are now of purely historical interest. They still exert a hold on the imagination, certainly, and artists take them up for their own purposes, but they no longer act as the grounds of discipline. In the absence of such commonalities, a generic conception of artistic production has become the norm.

Thus, whether an artist makes something from paint and canvas, metal, or videotape, whether it is the size of a building, or so small as to be invisible to the naked eye and whether it is encountered in a gallery, a city park, or on a computer screen, that thing (even if it is not a "thing" at all) can still be called a "work." So handy is this open-ended word that it has displaced the term "object" itself, which was used just as frequently (and for similar reasons) in the 1960s. Robert Morris spoke of "object-type art," while Marcel Broodthaers found object useful as a "zero word."¹ The marquee craft exhibition of the postwar period, *Objects: USA*, exploited the term's imprecision to include teapots, avant-garde sculpture, and everything in between.² However, as Lucy Lippard's book title *Dematerialization of the Art Object* suggests, the term was already insufficient to cover the range of current artistic practices by 1972. Unable to cope with the emergence of installation, earth art, video, and performance, object gave way to work.

Equally useful is "practice," which, bolstered by its homology with "praxis" (a Marxist philosophical term meaning roughly "theoretical knowledge put to use"), has become the universal occupation of today's creative class. Practice, like work, is a relative newcomer, having displaced "action," which again suffered from too much definition. While action carries strong connotations of the freighted gestures of the Abstract Expressionists, a practice can reasonably include every aspect of an artist's life. Chris Burden's infamous performance, *Shoot*, in which he arranged to be shot through the arm by a rifleman, was an action. Rirkrit Tiravanija's daily serving of Thai curry to gallery visitors is a practice, along with other multifarious, non-productive, do-it-yourself art phenomena that have proliferated under the recently-fashionable heading of "relational aesthetics."³

"Site," meanwhile, is the word of choice not only for artists but even for institutions such as SITE: Santa Fe—an art museum in all but name. Site conflates the place of an artwork's

production with that of its reception, and in this respect alone represents an improvement upon the now old-fashioned term “studio.” The artist’s studio, as in the case of Brancusi, is characterized by artisanal (rather than mass) production. A studio is inhabited by a limited number of workers, under the leadership of a single individual who is the author of anything made there. Like an object and an action, a studio is singular and confined, rather than multiple and open. In her book *The Machine in the Studio*, Caroline Jones has provided a rich account of the passing away of the studio as the normative concept applied to places of artistic production.⁴ She locates the shift, again, in the 1960s, when American artists like Frank Stella, Andy Warhol, and Robert Rauschenberg embraced serial and industrial production, adopted the personae of managers rather than makers, and ultimately left the enclosed environment of the studio behind entirely in order to produce site-specific work *in situ*. The power of the site can be witnessed in action in Rauschenberg’s works, which constituted a deconstructive assault on the studio and the gallery simultaneously.⁵ This is not to say that contemporary artists no longer work in studios, obviously, or even that the old magic of these spaces cannot be put back into play. It is not the studio itself, but the secure authorial power that it once embodied that can never be fully recaptured.

The foregoing may seem a rather general way to begin the conclusion to this book. But it might go a long way toward understanding the identity crisis that faces a fourth problem word: “craft” itself. The much-discussed decision by the American Craft Museum in New York to change its name to the Museum of Arts and Design, or the dropping of the final two words from the name of the California College of Arts and Crafts, signify more than local concerns. The American Craft Council and its sister organization, the British Crafts Council, are consciously undertaking parallel processes of re-definition, the former revamping its journal *American Craft* and considering re-entry into the fray of contemporary art exhibitions, and the latter closing its London exhibition space (to much dismay amongst loyalists) and restructuring itself as a development and support organization. Each of these individual institutions has its own story, related more to questions of commercial viability than theoretical integrity, and it is too early to predict the outcome of any of these attempts at rebranding and redirection. But it would be well for all of these institutions to remember that, issues of nomenclature aside, studio craft has not managed to adapt itself well to the historical shifts in contemporary art described above. As a field of production, studio craft is still unswervingly devoted to the creation of “objects.” It is defined by the mastery and enactment of a set of readily identified “actions” (throwing a pot, making a basket, etc.). And, as its very name suggests, it has not yet begun to grapple with the realities of the “post-studio” environment.

Ironically, as I hope this book has demonstrated, craft without the “studio” modifier has always been a crucial factor in the sphere of modern and contemporary art. Matters are no different today. In fact, craft seems positively fashionable in the present moment, as artists, architects, and designers evince a fascination with process and materials not seen since the heyday of the Counterculture in the late 1960s. (Amusingly, this fervor for craft is often

discussed under the heading of “production values,” as if what was being described were Hollywood film and not art.)⁶ When the 2004 Whitney Biennial was positively received by critics for its “youth-heavy emphasis on gloss and craft,” it caused considerable head-scratching amongst craftspeople accustomed to complaining about art world prejudice.⁷ In Britain, meanwhile, three of the recent winners of Britain’s prestigious Turner Prize are deeply involved with issues of craft: Tracey Emin, Grayson Perry, and Simon Starling. As we have seen, Emin’s engagement with craft depends on an implicit presumption of its pathos, and the same could be said of Perry’s work, which employs pottery as a vehicle for the exposure of a hair-raisingly frank interior monologue.⁸

Whatever one thinks of the cults of personality around Emin and Perry, though, no one could doubt the seriousness and complexity with which Simon Starling employs the concepts of craft. His prize-winning work *Shedboatshed* might possibly be a sign of things to come: a work in which all the thinking operates through process, but which makes no assumptions about the preconditions or results of that endeavor. Starling’s work consists of a shed that the artist found along the banks of the Rhine river, transformed into a raft, paddled down the river, and re-erected at a museum in Basel (see Plate 16). The word “craft” has a double meaning here, as both an activity and a genre of object. Woodcraft turns into a watercraft, and back again. Starling’s personal interaction with the universal concerns of shelter and transit could only occur through the medium of artisanal activity. *Shedboatshed* makes no claims about an intrinsically superior craft “ethic,” and in its displacement of materials from one site to another (a combination of baroque excess and rigorous efficiency) seems even to lampoon the first law of ecologically responsible tourism—“take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints.” But Starling is nonetheless staging artisanal work through art in a way that Kenneth Frampton would doubtless approve of: a highly aware way of being-in-the-world. Serious thinking about our own personal place in the environment, Starling suggests, will inevitably involve thinking through craft.⁹

The conceptual depth of Starling’s practice, and even the celebrity of artists like Perry and Emin, have gone some way towards rehabilitating craft in the eyes of the British art world; but their success has certainly not redounded to the benefit of poor old studio craft. In fact, the current fascination with means of production—not just on the part of these British artists, but many others across the globe—may be happening despite, and not because of, efforts to promote the crafts as a separate-but-equal branch of the visual arts. Grayson Perry himself has been notably forceful in his dismissal of the studio craft movement, writing:

I see the craft world as a kind of lagoon and the art world in general as the ocean. Some artists shelter in this lagoon, because their imagination isn’t robust enough to go out into the wider sea. Although there are some very good things being made, the craft world at the moment is set up to preserve something that can’t look after itself.¹⁰

Perry’s metaphor, which plays on the pastoral idea of a protected space of retreat, returns us to the fact that studio craft’s dilemma may be better captured not in the word “craft”

at all, but rather “studio.” The romance of the work space, having been comprehensively dismantled (or at least critiqued) elsewhere in contemporary art, is still alive and well in the crafts. This is partly due to the fact that crafted objects are by their very nature evocative of the way in which they were made, a trait that is amplified by the organization of the craft movement into discrete institutions and groups along media lines. The sheer appeal of craft-in-action also doubtless plays a role: the hot and sweaty theatrics of the glass hot shop, the fountains of wood shavings produced by turners at the lathe, the magical transformations that occur on the pottery wheel, and even the slower, mesmerizing back-and-forth of a loom or the raising of a vessel from sheet metal. The problem with this seductive aspect of craft is that it props up a hidebound attitude towards the nature of artistic enterprise. Looking back at the advent of Conceptualism from the vantage point of 1986, the British artist Victor Burgin isolated the rejection of the action and the object as a particularly important breakthrough: “Art practice was no longer to be defined as an artisanal activity, a process of crafting fine objects in a given medium, it was rather to be seen as a set of operations performed in a *field* of signifying practices, perhaps centred on a medium but certainly not bounded by it.”¹¹

If people who care about craft above all else are to shake off the air of crabby conservatism that hangs about that word, they must not hold the notions of studio, action, and object as sacred. Fortunately, however, because of their longstanding attachment to these terms and all they imply, it could be argued that those who have invested deeply in craft now enjoy a unique vantage point from which to engage in critical practice—a chance, that is, to become newly relevant to the art world as a whole.

At several points in this book, I have tried to draw attention to historic and contemporary works that operate in just this way, by exploiting what seems to be a predicament. Robert Arneson, Judy Chicago, Gijs Bakker, Mike Kelley, Gord Peteran, Miriam Schapiro, Richard Slee, Emma Woffenden, and Yagi Kazuo, each in his or her own way, take their strength as artists from some aspect of craft’s intrinsic weakness. Each occupies what seems on one level to be a traditional studio environment, operating within the tightly defined parameters of certain activities in order to make discrete objects. Yet they also undercut the stability of these fixed points in the artistic equation. For them craft is not only a way of thinking; it is also a foil. For Arneson, Bakker, Peteran, and Slee, the object is a self-regarding instrument that calls the basis of its own value into question. Yagi and Woffenden distance themselves from normative ideas of craft as an action, so as to reveal the stakes of working material more clearly. For Chicago, Schapiro, and Kelley, the physical and social space in which craft objects are made becomes a means of displacing value structures. In each of these cases, the potential frameworks for artistic production were generic—work, practice, and site—but craft’s specificity and limitedness offered a possibility for useful friction. In such sleights of hand, the challenge is always to see craft not as a subject for celebration or self-congratulation, nor as a disqualification for serious artistic enterprise, but rather as a problem to be thought through again and again.

I should add, in closing, that this book has been written partly in a spirit of instigation. I have mostly discussed the relation of craft to the avant garde, and have devoted comparatively little attention to “traditional” craftspeople who occupy a proudly conservative position. This is because, frankly, I do not think that all craft demands critical analysis. A modern object that ticks all the craft boxes—an object that simply *is* supplemental, material, skilled, pastoral, and amateur—may be fascinating from the perspective of a historian, but it does not necessarily present an interesting case for theoretical discourse. So, when a maker insists that the best way to understand their object is to use it, I am sometimes inclined to agree. My two most prized possessions are a Warren MacKenzie bowl and an Art Carpenter Wishbone chair. I wrote much of this book sitting in the latter, only a few feet from the former, and looking at both in the idle moments between sentences. I would hotly dispute any claim that either of these objects is culturally insignificant, aesthetically unsatisfying, or otherwise valueless. The histories of such objects, and the people that made them, are long overdue. They should be written with as much sensitivity and care as craft historians can summon. On the other hand, to write those histories accurately, we must concede that they occupy a safe position in the landscape of the visual arts—a lagoon, perhaps. We should all be glad for the availability of such an option, but that feeling should not necessarily make us feel compelled to “interpretation” *per se*. For the historian, theorist, or critic who is interested in the problem of craft, the challenge is not to subject every crafted object to an equivalent degree of analysis, but rather to identify and do justice to the reality of craft’s position within modern culture. Above all, this means resisting the impulse unthinkingly to celebrate craft in all its manifestations. Thinking through craft is a useful exercise, and never more so than when it creates uncertainty.