Thinking Through Craft

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INTRODUCTION

Thinking through ... craft? Isn't craft something mastered in the hands, not in the mind? Something consisting of physical actions, rather than abstract ideas?

Well, it all depends. Writing about craft usually concerns itself with "the crafts"—specific processes carried out in specific materials. Chiefly these are ceramics, glass making, metalsmithing, woodworking, and the various combinations of process and material that fall under the heading of the textile arts. For the past century and more, a body of literature has grown around these medium-based disciplines. Most of these writings are promotional. Some are critical, and a small percentage is historical. Rare, however, is the text that deals with craft in theoretical terms: a text that treats craft as an idea. This book aims to do just that. It is a consideration of what craft has meant within the broader context of the visual arts, and what it could be made to mean, if thought through in extra-disciplinary terms.

Craft's position within the arts is a complicated affair. In some ways, it is analogous to the term "color." Just as every object must be made in some way, and hence could be considered in some sense to be crafted, every object has color. When one says that an object is colorful, this is not taken to mean that other objects lack color entirely; similarly, when we say that something is highly crafted, we are distinguishing it only in degree, and not in kind, from other things that have been made. There are artworks that are not only colorful, but are in some sense about color—by artists as diverse as Titian, Rubens, Monet, Kandinsky, and Richter. Equally, artworks may not only be well made, but may address the conditions of their own manufacture. And there are other parallels. Like art that seems to be about its own craftsmanship, art about color was at some points in history thought to be inferior. Finally, like color, craft is a word that most people think they understand—a commonsense term. Yet both have been subject to considerable speculation.

Of course, there are differences between craft and color too. There is no Color Council or Color Museum for the advancement of colorful art. It's not possible to make a living as a practitioner of color, unless, perhaps, you are an industry consultant. There are no academic programs teaching color as a field of artistic production, though there are many classes teaching students how to manipulate color to advantage. All of these differences point to the fact that craft has a constituency and economic basis, and hence a social presence, which color does not have. Yet, this lack of advocacy has not prevented color from being a major term of artistic experimentation and debate in the modern era. Maybe it's time for those who care about craft to allow it to flourish in a similar state of benign neglect. If craft were left to its own devices, perhaps it could happily occupy an unproblematic spot in the
pantheon of art concepts. But then we would miss something else that craft has to offer, something that is most clearly (if unintentionally) proven by the marginalization of those institutions that champion it: craft, as a cultural practice, exists in opposition to the modern conception of art itself.

CRAFT AT THE LIMITS

From this perspective, craft is perhaps not so much like color after all. It is more like other terms in art theory, such as “kitsch,” “dемaterialization,” or even “life” itself. Each of these terms has, within certain critical frameworks, been described as the opposite of modern art—a state into which an individual artwork, or even the entire category of art itself, might inadvertently collapse and thus lose its integrity and purpose. Yet, precisely for this reason, each has been crucial to the development of modern art, whether framed positively as an unattainable goal, or negatively as a means of critique. Furthermore, each of these non-art categories has been defined in a variety of ways under different historical circumstances. The art world has had within its ranks many enemies of kitsch, but also a variety of enfants terribles from Kurt Schwitters to Jeff Koons who have gleefully embraced it, resulting in what Thomas Crow has called “a productive confusion within the normal hierarchy of cultural prestige”1 (Figure 0.1). Artists who have gestured towards the realm of the “dемaterialized,” and hence to the realm of non-art, range just as widely, from Marcel Duchamp to Yves Klein to Martin Creed. And there is also a long list of artists from Robert Rauschenberg to Yoko Ono to Tracey Emin who have claimed, quixotically, that what they really want to do is to erase the line between art and “life.” Modern art might appear to be a realm of purely aestheticized and transcendental objects. But in fact, as Johanna Drucker has recently argued, it has always been an infinitely varied field defined by a series of contingent horizons.2 This word—horizon—is apt because it conveys the idea of a border that can never be reached, but is nonetheless intrinsic to any sense of position. The condition of modern art is defined in relation to other conditions that oppose it, but always from a distance.

This book argues that craft should be thought of as one of these horizons: as a conceptual limit active throughout modern artistic practice. In order to pursue this line of thinking, one must first dispense with the simplistic formulation that the crafts can (or should) be art. Theodor Adorno has the definitive word on this matter, which has plagued and misdirected so many writers in the past: “Posed from on high, the question whether something . . . is or is no longer art leads nowhere.” Anything can be taken for art, craft included, and that is all there is to say on the matter. But as surely as this is a banal truism, the opposite proposition, that art is not craft—that it might gain something by defining itself against that category—is a rather interesting one. For, as Adorno continues: “Because art is what it has become, its concept refers to what it does not contain.”3 If craft is a frontier at which the aesthetic construct of modern art has often stopped short, then in that very stopping, art confronts its presumptions about itself. What’s more, this same logic can be pursued from the other
side of the horizon. It is equally possible to engage in the ongoing definition (which is to say, the history) of art by espousing a position conventionally associated with craft—but, again, only by confronting the ever-receding frontier that marks craft as extra-artistic.

**CRAFT AS A PROCESS**

Thus far I have been employing “craft” rather loosely, as a word, an idea, and a category. Of course, it can be all these things, but it might be more usefully conceived as a process. Rather than presenting craft as a fixed set of things—pots, rather than paintings—this book
will analyze it as an approach, an attitude, or a habit of action. Craft only exists in motion. It is a way of doing things, not a classification of objects, institutions, or people. It is also multiple: an amalgamation of interrelated core principles, which are put into relation with one another through the overarching idea of "craft". Each of these principles is addressed by a chapter of this book. First, while the modern artwork has usually been held to be autonomous, the work of craft is supplemental. Second, where artistic practice has normally been oriented to optical effects, craft is organized around material experience. A third chapter, less dialectical in its arguments, presents the case of skill. This is the lynchpin of the book, in that skill is the most complete embodiment of craft as an active, relational concept rather than a fixed category. The final two chapters turn to craft’s situation in the modern social fabric: the pastoral and the amateur, two ideological frameworks within which craft is structured. The first of these terms normally has positive overtones, and the second a pejorative quality. Yet I hope to show that both the pastoral and the amateur are conceptual structures in which craft’s marginalization has been consciously put to use.

Other commentators have addressed most of these topics. But I hope to offer something new by seeing these five principles as properties of a dynamic phenomenon, open to debate and dissent as well as affirmation. Rather than attempting to define craft, I hope to show that it is a subject that gives rise to interpenetrating and sometimes conflicting historical tendencies. I also hope to redirect the debate about craft by focusing on its subordination. Understandably, partisans of the crafts are unlikely to see craft’s second-class status within art theory as something to accept at face value, but this resistance has also led to a lack of serious thought about craft’s inferiority relative to art. While art is a matter of nomination within an infinite field—that is, art is anything that is called art—craft involves self-imposed limits. Modern art is staked on the principle of freedom, its potential transcendence of all limits, including (even especially) those of craft. Yet in the very marginality that results from craft’s bounded character, craft finds its indispensability to the project of modern art. My central argument, when all is said and done, is that craft’s inferiority might be the most productive thing about it.

Before proceeding any further it might be helpful to explain, by way of examples, the various key terms that organize the book. The Piet Mondrian painting and the Anni Albers weaving seen in Plates 1 and 2 are usually seen as a work of art and a work of craft, respectively. Both are self-consciously modern, and superficially similar in style. The difference between them seems, on one level, to be rather arbitrary—one is a textile, the other a textile with paint on its surface. It is easy enough to hang an Albers weaving on the wall and call it art, and indeed museums have done so many times. It would be more difficult to upholster a chair with Mondrian’s painting, but certainly not impossible. And yet there are good (if only relative) reasons to attach the term “craft” to only one of these objects. Mondrian’s painting is aggressively autonomous, which is to say self-standing, not to be touched. It is intended as an object of purely visual contemplation. It was created using a technique, certainly, but without any highly developed manual skill on the part of the
painter. Through the agency of specialized institutions—the Sidney Janis Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art, in particular—the painting has acquired great financial value, and Mondrian the status of a great artist. In its passage from unheralded canvas to priceless work of art, the painting has always been presented as having intrinsic, rather than purely commercial value. Its real worth as an artwork supposedly lies outside the normal flow of commercial supply and demand.

By contrast, Albers's weavings were originally meant to decorate a room, to serve a functional purpose as upholstery fabric, or even to serve as preliminary designs for mass-produced textile. Her wall hanging appeals not only optically, but also through its tactile juxtaposition of contrasting materials. To see it is not enough; one feels the need to rub it between one's fingers to fully appreciate its design. It was made by a professional employing a specialized skill, and indeed attests to Albers's mastery of loom weaving. As an object made by a woman in a sexist culture, and without any institutional authorization as an artwork, however, it carries overtones of amateurism. All of these points of difference between the work of art and the work of craft can, and should, be called into question. Certainly, all have been the source of resentment over the years on the part of craftspeople. As they and their allies have perceived the state of affairs, objects that are associated with craft have been unfairly undervalued since the beginnings of the modern era.

In particular, the disregard for such objects has been convincingly critiqued as one subplot within the more general history of the devaluation of women's art. As recently as 2006 the Tate Modern in London staged an exhibition about Anni Albers's husband Josef, pairing him with fellow Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy. The museum's texts made virtually no mention of the famous weaver, an art historical erasure that is unfortunately all too common. So there are good reasons to despise the lopsided scheme in which craft, often coded as feminine or even as "ethnic," is always seen as inferior to the hegemonic category of art. Yet, reclaiming objects like the Albers weaving for art history seems an insufficient goal for craft theory and history. As dismaying as the overtly sexist, classist, or racist aspects of craft's inferiority may be, that disheartening story should not blind us to the complexity and usefulness of craft's limitedness. In fact, as in most cases of asymmetrical power relations, it is precisely through an examination of the terms of its subordination that the social prejudices that attend craft can be redressed.

There is also a positive side to craft's inferiority. Conceived as a "problem," the idea of craft has fueled all manner of artistic and social changes in the past, and it will continue to do so in the future. Indeed, paintings like Mondrian's, which espouse a transcendental logic for art and radically deny their own materiality, turn out to be more the exception than the rule in modern art. The limits embodied by craft are not only psychologically comforting, but also conceptually useful. The implication of a decorative object in its surroundings; the sensual characteristics of specific materials; the regulation imposed by specialized tools when properly employed; the sociopolitical connotations of the figure of the artisan; and even the literal limits of time and space suggested by long days in a small shop all provide a

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kind of friction that keep pressing questions of form, category, and identity open for further investigation.

To hazard one last metaphor, "craft" might be conceived not only as a horizon but as a constellation of stars—useful for purposes of navigation, but impossible to actually inhabit. "The crafts," by contrast, are a well-defined terrain, an archipelago of discrete islands with fixed boundaries. Just as it is difficult to pin down where the pertinence of craft begins and ends, it is normally quite obvious who is a weaver and who isn’t, what has been made on a potter’s wheel and what hasn’t. This is no reason to look down upon the crafts. Alongside others who will be discussed in this book, such as artists, architects and designers, many craftspeople will be offered as exemplary cases for study. These figures operate on craft from within, rather than without, and in so doing have caused a good deal of useful confusion.

I have found myself writing this book at an exciting and somewhat nervous time for those who are deeply interested in craft. The artist Robert Morris once defined Thomas Kuhn’s notion of a paradigm as “a set of limits for response in a cultural time.” Modern ideas about craft constitute a classic paradigm by this definition, a structure of thinking that has performed a necessary but rather static role within modernity. These ideas only become visible when the underpinning structures of thought are reassessed. Such a paradigm shift occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, when the economic role of the artisan was partly displaced. Under these circumstances craft took on a largely symbolic and often elegiac character, most completely realized within the ideology of the Arts and Crafts movement. In the decades immediately following the Second World War, another such paradigm shift occurred, as the ground on which craft operated shifted gradually from the domain of commercial production to that of galleries, museums, and private collectors. The “designer-craftsman” of the 1930s—a figure that was itself descended from Arts and Crafts goals—was gradually though incompletely displaced by the “artist-craftsman.” As this book will suggest, we are currently witnessing another such change, as post-disciplinary practice mounts a challenge to the established framework of modern craft. In the twentieth century, craft was mainly defined in terms of the crafts, but it is by no means clear that this will be the case in the future. Craft has always been an idea that transcends discipline—it pertains with equal relevance in pottery and architecture—and appreciation of that fact seems to be increasingly widely shared. Just as scholars are beginning to view craft practice from the standpoint of social history, anthropology, and economics, practitioners of various kinds are exploring the problematics of craft through increasingly diverse means.

A final, brief word on the organization and parameters of this study is in order. As will become apparent, each of the five chapters is structured in a similar fashion. Each begins with a survey of theoretical texts, moves on to historical accounts, and finally narrows down to critical analysis of individual works or texts. My goal is twofold: first, to subject the ideas in this book to the varied tools of theory, history, and criticism; and second, to show that the principles of craft have been manifested in objects and tested by artists in numerous, sometimes mutually antithetical ways. I have tried to draw my examples broadly, from craft,
art, design, painting, and architectural theory, but the particular topics I have chosen are meant to be suggestive, not comprehensive. Again, craft is not a defined practice but a way of thinking through practices of all kinds, and there is no reason that any one medium or genre of production should be more conducive to this way of thinking than another.

Having said this, I want to be quite clear that this is a book about craft under the conditions of modernity, and particularly in relation to modern art. I have not tried to write a history of craft in pre-modern contexts, much less a master theory that transcends history. One failing of the book, born of my own limitations as an author, is its arbitrary geographical emphasis on the American and British contexts, with some reference to Japan and continental Europe. This is not in any way to deny the validity and significance of modern craft history in Australia, Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere. Though I regret my inability to present a broader range of examples authoritatively, I hope that this book will be taken in the spirit it is meant—as an introduction. In matters of geography, as in all other respects, I hope to open up future discussion rather than close it down.