

CRAFTSPERSONHOOD:
THE FORGING OF SELFHOOOD THROUGH MAKING

by Jonathan Morgan

31 December 2016

Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts

jmorgan@idsva.edu

Word Count: 7,738

This paper examines the unique structures of identity formation within the craftsperson/maker mindset and their relation to Western views of work and labor. The contemporary Maker Movement has its origins not only in the internet revolution, but also in the revival of handicraft during the last several economic recessions. Economic uncertainty drives people toward the ideals and practices of craft as a way to regain a sense of agency and control. One learns how to become an active participant in our material lives by making and maintaining the objects that surround us. This orientation toward craft has the potential to alter the practitioner's sense of self going forward. I will argue that the work-based nature of craft leads to a unique and positive sense of self that the assumed freedom of 'art' and intellectualized labor unwittingly discourages. Tacit mechanisms shape the craft mindset through emphasis on skill, mastery of materials, polymathic problem solving, and quality. Throughout this paper, a clear emphasis on materiality as a profound source of embodied knowledge will be maintained to reveal craftspersonhood as a source of deep existential fulfillment and practical philosophy. Acknowledging and embracing our intrinsic materiality and all that it has to teach us is imperative in the face of a consumption-centric culture of excess and exploitation that looms over much of the West.

What is it About Craft?

There is no shortage of philosophical and theoretical texts discussing art. A jaded person may even ask why one would bother adding to the mountain range of pontification and postulation on the topic. Such a view disregards the profound impact that these ideas have beyond the realm of art; they stretch into politics, economics, ethics, and more due to the interconnected nature of philosophy. However, there is a chasm lurking deep within these hills of theory; one that stretches back into the primordial past of art as a concept. Craft has long been considered as a category of art, but this belief is a disservice to craft; a human activity that both predates the emergence of art and is noticeably distinct from it. Craft is a concept worthy of study in and of itself that has yet to be recognized under a unifying philosophical theory. I propose that now is the perfect time to do so and the nature of selfhood within craft practice—craftspersonhood—is a shining example of why this is so.

What is it about the craft mentality that makes it noteworthy against that of the artist? Why should we bother exploring such a topic and is it really that unique? I will argue that the temporal and skills-based nature of craft leads to the facilitation of a unique and positive sense of self that the freedom of ‘art’ and intellectualized labor discourages. The ‘essence of craft’ that forms craftspersonhood is built on the tenets of self-improvement, material awareness, and a sense of community. Together these form a three-fold system of selfhood found within craft practice that stretches into countless aspects of life and identity while fostering selflessness and a service mentality. This result is markedly at odds with the avant-garde aesthetic mentality of modernity and conceptualism which praises the freedom of creative genius and the recognition of the individual as celebrity.

Martin Heidegger's ontological work on modern technology serves as a methodological guide for uncovering the essence of craft. 'Enframing,' or seeing the entire world as nothing but a resource awaiting use and consumption, reveals a site of tacit cultural resistance to craft which encourages identification with the world, not mastery over it. This conflict feeds into Hannah Arendt's analysis of the three types of human activity within the *vita activa*—Labor, Work, and Action—in contrast to the pure contemplation of the *vita contemplativa*. Arendt accounts for the 'essence' of each activity within the *vita activa* and provides the ground for the essence of craft to act as a 'fourth activity' to bind all three. Furthermore, I argue that the inclusion of a fourth activity exposes the blurred barriers between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* as craft shares elements of both acting in concert. The tensions expressed in these dualities—enframing vs craft, *activa* vs *contemplativa*—have a historical precedent evidenced in Larry Shiner's work charting the conceptualization of art. As art developed from so-called 'non-art' origins, evidence of the historic schism between art and craft in the West begins to emerge.

The role of skill and its development through intentional practice in craft is critically important to the formation of selfhood. Richard Sennett goes into great detail on this topic while reintroducing the concept of material awareness/consciousness and its effect on identity during the making process. This focus feeds into what Peter Dormer refers to as craft knowledge. Tacit by nature and based in real actions, craft knowledge has the most potential to unite the *vita activa* and *contemplativa*. His exploration of this concept and its reliance on face-to-face interactions reveals a search for existential fulfillment via commercially obsolete technologies.

Glenn Adamson's work explores craft as a process or mode of thought rather than a category of art. This reinforces the potential for a unique essence of craft and also explores the

idea of rules and limitations defining craft. When reviewing Peter Korn's first-hand account of craft practice as an act of self-transformation occupying a span of time, not just an event, the roles of material awareness, skill, and tacit knowledge are seen in action. Korn's philosophical reflections on this process are key to showing the transformative effect that craft practice can have when pursued intentionally.

Malcolm Gladwell questions introspection as the best means of obtaining truth; this is a warning against a purely contemplative life within the mind. His analysis of thin-slicing and priming carry both epistemological and phenomenological implications that add greater depth to the essence of craft and its function within the human mind. Calls for the elimination of Work and Labor to allow for the free pursuit of intellectual and artistic achievements ignore this and obscure effective solutions to very real problems of our time. The essence of craft is best fostered through making things and embracing the materiality of human existence.

The Essence of Craft

Arendt describes an active and fulfilling life—the *vita activa*—as composed of three basic human activities: Labor, Work, and Action (Arendt 7). The fruits of Labor, produced by humanity as *animal laborens*, are meant for immediate consumption and leave no real mark on the world (86-87). Work is the realm of *homo faber* and encompasses the creation of lasting artifacts that distinguish the human world from the natural (7). Finally, Action is immaterial interaction that takes place directly between distinct human beings as free agents and is presented by Arendt as the highest of human activities since it cannot be delegated to others and is based in human individuality and freedom (7, 176). Fine Art is closest to the realm of Action as seen in conceptual art and the Western focus on originality as the most important quality of an artwork.

In stark opposition to these ideals, we find craft and its connection to tradition, materiality, and discipline as positive and empowering forces.

Craft is not simply a classification of art or technical skill. This was recognized in the progressivism of the early twentieth century when schools were seen as “mechanisms for social reform” and heavily utilized vocational education to achieve this goal (Adamson 78). Adamson’s account of John Dewey’s focus on experience exemplifies this. Dewey argued that the building of craft skill would force interactions with and experiences through materials that “would produce in the student a general physical and mental ‘readiness’” (79). He recognized that there was more to craft than just the teaching of technical skill for the sake of production. The echoing of this recognition in the curriculum of the Teacher’s College at Columbia University at the time is further validation that there is more to this concept we refer to as ‘craft’ (80). Others, like Harold Rugg, editor of *Social Frontier*, believed that “any craft had inherent moral integrity as a creative experience” and should be seen as “a means of working towards ‘a sound society’” (81). There is an ‘essence’ to craft, as Heidegger might describe it, that forms the foundation of our cultural and historical understandings of this concept. It is tied to what he described as the act of *poiēsis*, or bringing forth into being and the subsequent revealing of truth (Heidegger 317).

Skilled Self-Improvement

Within the realm of *poiēsis*, we must address the term *technē* which represents the use of technology and materials as a mode of revealing truth (318-319). This is not to be confused with *modern* technology, or ‘enframing,’ which Heidegger points out is a challenging mode of existence, not a revealing one (319-320). In ancient Greece, art was less about aesthetics and more about revealing truth since “*poiēsis* of the fine arts was also called *technē*” (339). When

Heidegger refers to the ‘fine arts’ here, he means those disciplines which provide a creative expression of ideas beyond practicality. What is especially interesting is that the knowledge gained through such phenomenological revealing is tacit by nature, as explained in Peter Dormer’s work on craft knowledge. He provides the example of how the efforts to build efficient steam engines in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to the discovery of the First and Second Laws of Thermodynamics. These essential laws—nearly every machine and computer relies on them—are intellectual insights gained from material experience. As Dormer points out, “The laws of thermodynamics [...] cannot tell you how to build a single engine. To build an engine demands the practical knowledge of the engineer and machinist—which is complex; much of it defies description in words” (Dormer 10). Teaching theory can be done in words, but the development and mastery of such relies on real experience. Practical experience with the world that we exist in as material beings is an easily overlooked element at the heart of *technē* and is essential to Heidegger’s methodology. A close examination of any science, and much of the most successful philosophy, reveals the truth that “practical know-how is a spur to conceptual reflection” (57).

The term ‘technique’ is rooted in the word *technē* and is the medium through which one acquires skill. The techniques one uses in a craft practice gain special significance when, as Sennett points out, they become intimate aspects of expression for the expert (Sennett 149). First-hand experience of this development encourages a sense of respect for the efforts of others possessing high levels of skill through what Gladwell describes as priming. This is the phenomenon where one’s behavior can be unwittingly influenced by seemingly innocuous words and other stimuli. For example, simply by seeding sentences with words relating to age and

death, one can make readers walk more slowly (Gladwell 52-53). Not only can autonomic behaviors be influenced in this way, but cognitive ones as well. Experiments at New York University in 1996 reported that 82% of students who were primed with notions of politeness and patience behaved accordingly and in stark contrast to those who were not (53-55).¹ While priming is not a magical tool for controlling behavior, it reveals an essential truth about how experiences affect behavior on an unconscious level both physically and mentally. When one approaches a craft practice with the intention of developing expert skills within that tradition, they internalize a sense of respect for others mentioned above. One is aware, on many levels, of what that person had to endure to get there. Through priming, it should be easy to see why skill was a major source of authority and respect within the medieval European workshop where craftspersonhood was at its regional height of expression (Sennett 54).

The development of expertise is a naturally slow process. Sennett suggests the now commonly cited number of 10,000 hours of intentional practice for one to attain mastery of any skill (172). The exactness of this number aside, it illustrates the patience needed for craft to develop into something more than just activity while yielding an opportunity for the craftsperson to learn and internalize said patience. This challenges Arendt's view that child prodigies in the non-physical arts "can attain a perfection without much training or experience" and reveals key oversights in her assessment as we will see later (Arendt 169). This long process stretches far beyond the creation of specific objects in succession. Arendt's assertion that making things—a form of Work—provides a clean end in the creation of a wholly new object ignores the process of craft (143-144). The crafted object is not simply thrust into the world to exist based solely on

¹ While there have been criticisms of possible irreproducibility in Bagh's experimental findings, the wider field of psychological and neuroscientific research related to priming is established as a viable line of inquiry with empirical data from MRI and EEG scan supporting the existence of the phenomenon and its variants.

a prescribed model. When craftspersonhood is involved, qualitative analysis takes place in order to continue the growth and development of the craftsperson. The development of their skills throughout the entire making process shows this unification of the *vita activa* and *contemplativa*. Crafting an object is more than just making something; the finished object is a part of the larger development of the skill and identity of the craftsperson.

Because “the skilled practitioner takes proficiency for granted,” as Adamson points out, the realities of learning a skill are often hidden from view (Adamson 75). The shift in the 1970s toward teaching crafts to art students only as needed further hid this process as each discipline was seen simply as a means to an end resulting in “amateurish production values” being overlooked while artistic vision was praised (74). Simple fabrication may be reduced to single events, but craftspersonhood is an existential process more akin to Korn’s revelation “that life is a continual process of becoming” (Korn 20). His experience and reflection on a life built upon craftspersonhood is of supreme value as it provides a lived account of Adamson’s argument that, “The experience of craft, precisely because it is hard won, is always a revelation” (Adamson 75). The craftsperson then undergoes a continual transformation of skills.

This process reinforces the ‘for the sake of doing a job well’ mentality that many attribute to craft. The dedication to this ideal is based in a selflessness found within craftspersonhood that one can, counterintuitively, take pride in. Sennett’s example of open-source computing illustrates this social phenomenon in the most abundant example of this practice, the Linux operating system. Linux relies on programmers adding to the public accumulation of code and invention in their free time for no direct financial reward or fame. Sennett describes this group as “focussed on achieving quality, on doing good work, which is the craftsman’s primordial mark of identity”

(Sennett 25). Furthermore, this development process has worked exceedingly well. The fact that Linux-based software is used by more than just consumers attests to its quality with the Large Hadron Collider as just one of the more significant users of this quality-driven, community-crafted software platform (Lunstedt). Internal truths are revealed to the maker via *technē*. By dedicating oneself to this ideal, the nature of one's strengths, weaknesses, and character is revealed and improvement may be sought through disciplined practice and selflessness.

Material Awareness

Korn's revelation that life was not in fact "all surface" but more a concealed, deep, and complex reality is an almost anti-idealist view of truth (Korn 16). Throughout his life he sought a more profound level of knowledge by going through the world around him and exploring all the complexities and implications of its materiality. By leaning into this sort of revelation the craftsperson achieves mastery of their practice and the coinciding fulfillment. Korn describes "a centeredness that touches upon the very essence of fulfillment" when he gained complete confidence in his manual abilities and how his "consciousness [came] to inhabit the tip of the knife and the tooth of the saw, so that [he was] not only in the world, but somehow of the world" (53). Recognition of one's worldliness and materiality creates an intimacy between the self and the objects that surround us. On a practical level, increased awareness of the care and maintenance of physical objects reveals similar needs of the self. However, Arendt suggests that a dangerous loss of agency can occur in Work and Labor when one's body and tools unify in repetitive motion with the tool or machine in question dictating the movements of the worker (Arendt 146). This is not a loss of agency but more a suspension of the self that teaches the

craftsperson perseverance while also granting their mind freedom to wander in the realm of the *vita contemplativa* for a time. When chosen freely, this suspension grants insight into nature of the materials and tools at hand.

Good craftwork depends on the craftsperson's "curiosity" regarding materials (Sennett 120). This instills a level of selflessness as they take their focus outside of their own subjectivity. Arendt's assertion that "only *homo faber* conducts himself as lord and master of the whole earth" through Work's shaping of raw material according to human will misses the point (Arendt 139). Such a view reflects Work *outside* of craftspersonhood. The curiosity Sennett mentions comes from trying to work with one's material and its inherent properties, not forcing it to succumb to one's desire. Such forcing and commanding is the enframing state of mind that Heidegger ascribes to modern technology that implies a challenging of reality over cooperation (Heidegger 324). Accepting the limitations of materials is a sort anti-enframing where one explicitly seeks cooperation with the natural world to reach a holistically beneficial outcome.

This encourages creative problem solving on a profound level and a unique inventiveness. Korn notes that just in preparing to build a piece of furniture, he had to become well versed in sharpening his chisels, the properties of distinct species of wood such as grain direction, movement, and strength, the chemical properties of adhesives he would use, the engineering of proper joints to hold strong while allowing seasonal movement of the wood, and also the tacit knowledge of how to control one's application of force and maintain disciplined focus (Korn 50-51). What's more difficult is that all of these pieces of information, which are but a fraction of what will be needed during the entire making process, can affect one another with a decision regarding one area of knowledge requiring on-the-fly adjustments in all others.

The unification of this mountain of information is too overwhelming to be done consciously. The craftsperson must achieve a level of intuitive familiarity that defines Dormer's view of craft knowledge. This development relies on what Gladwell identifies as thin-slicing. The term refers to the unconscious' ability to "find patterns in situations and behavior based on very narrow slices of experience" (Gladwell 23). This is not to say that expertise is built in tiny slices, but that thin-slicing is an essential part of said expertise in its ability to find patterns of causality hidden within one's previous knowledge and observations. There is even an editing process embedded within this as our unconscious mind "[sifts] through the situation in front of us, throwing out all that is irrelevant while we zero in on what matters" (33-4). When Korn was first hit with the complexities of furniture making, he had trouble 'zeroing in' on what mattered in the mountain of information he had to acquire. Only through working through the process could his mind utilize its thin-slicing ability to note those essential elements of the process based on the way the actions and materials at hand embodied them.

There are historic examples of this level of material awareness and how it can directly affect not just the craftsperson, but can add to his or her cultural identity. Michael Baxandall's analysis of German Renaissance limewood sculptures revealed consistent vertical forms as seen in Tilman Riemenschneider's work from the turn of the sixteenth century (Adamson 76).



Angel Figurines, Tilman Riemenschneider, c. 1505

Knowledge of the specific pattern of cracking in limewood guided the creation of these forms in order to avoid eventual catastrophe. This sort of material knowledge is required of all craft practitioners as Korn describes in his recounting of the myriad of factors that go into just selecting a piece of wood—species, drying method, previous storage practices, location of the board in the larger tree, and of the parts to be cut within the board—before one even begins to cut and fabricate a piece of furniture (Korn 29). These objects helped to make the visual identity of German Christians of the time acting as the foci of spiritual and proto-aesthetic appreciation. While Adamson points out that we cannot truly know the minds of these craftspeople, we do know that “they formed their representations, their culture, through a process of coming to know the lineaments of wood;” through the materials that defined their craftspersonhood (Adamson 77).

Similar to how such objects can help form cultural identity, their qualities can acquire cultural and personal equivalences as they gain emotional value over time. This phenomenon reveals the relational side of craft practice and is seen in how we often use material descriptors when referring to people. Strong and reliable people are well-grounded like a monolithic stone.

Forgiving and accommodating people are flexible like a supple piece of wood. Easy-going and even-keeled people ‘go with the flow’ as if they were a stream of water. Anthropomorphization of this kind is extremely commonplace and causes us to reflect on the values of tools and materials (Sennett 137). Sennett points to the concept of “honest” brickwork in the eighteenth century where no veneers were used to cover the bricks. Such construction was seen as carrying an ethical tone in its lack of deception and superficiality. This reveals how those involved in architecture and brick masonry were participating in a discussion about artificiality and naturalness in materials while using human qualities to parse out the differences. Thomas Jefferson’s home from this period, *Monticello*, is an example of a person using the culturally recognized traits of a material in the design of an aesthetic object.



Monticello, Thomas Jefferson, 1772

Jefferson intentionally leaves the bricks exposed in his symmetrical Neoclassical design to reflect an honesty and balance that he hoped to embed in his newly formed nation. He wanted to imbue it with the naturalness and honesty of the brick, not the artificiality of the faux marble stucco veneers that were the “social climber’s material of choice” at the time (Sennett 139). Materials acquire virtuous and viselike associations through use and reflection that can then turn around and affect our own understandings of these qualities in ourselves.

It is not a far leap to realize that one’s tools are material objects equally capable of such *poiēsis*. The same sort of anthropomorphization occurs here, but on an even more profound level

as tools require constant care and attention while, traditionally, remaining in the craftsperson's life for decades. Those values one might recognize in their tools can then begin to reflect back on the craftsperson just as Jefferson hoped his home would. The careful sharpening of a chisel is an attempt to keep its strength, accuracy, and reliability just like the exercise of self-control in one's life to preserve qualities of personality that they wish to keep and fortify. On another level, one even begins to see the act of making as a three 'person' act of cooperation as each player—material, tool, and maker—must work in concert with each other to achieve quality.

Community through Worldly Objects

The craftsperson makes objects for use by others, not just the maker. Ignoring this leads to isolation and possible failure as improvement can only occur through case studies of use and resulting feedback. Arendt's argument that mastery requires isolation as the individual dominates nature is flawed as it considers the market and exchange of goods as the only social dimension of the craftsperson's world (Arendt 160-161). From the moment one decides to craft an object, another person has been considered and continues to be as the craftsperson endeavours to make the object not for his or herself, but for the 'other' in the widest sense of the term. Thus, by considering the usefulness and benefit for the 'other' we see an element of relational truth to the revealing action of *technē* within craft. Such consideration actually mitigates possible selfishness and the potential isolation of the craftsperson that Arendt claims as natural in a life defined by Work, again demonstrating a limited view of craftspersonhood.

There is also a sense of community to be found in the traditions and rules dictating 'how things are done' in a given discipline. Within this, there are two categories to consider. First we have Human Rules which are designed by members of a social group often with the desire to

maintain order and stability. These can exploit others, but can just as easily be used for the good of the group. Then there are Material Limitations which are disinterested, objective, and carry no ideological bias for or against a person. This is due to the nature of craft knowledge, as described by Dormer, which is the means of uncovering Material Limitations through demonstration and repeated effort (Dormer 11). As a result, achievement within Material Limitations is a personal act of critical problem solving and invention. Overcoming Human Rules is a social act of rebellion which is subjective and more problematic to take pride in.

Tradition is handed down via Human Rules and exposes the realities and achievements of others within Material Limitations. Recognition of this can inspire gratitude for the pioneering work of others within said tradition and appreciation for the inventiveness of past generations against Material Limitations. Dormer points out that even repetitive craft actions, often seen as ‘mindless’ or simple, require huge amounts of effort, self-control, and acute material awareness before those actions can become ingrained in the maker’s body and mind as effortless (Dormer 41). What is being acquired is the tacit knowledge of the craft being practiced that cannot be acquired through any other means. Reading about the process of planing a piece of wood smooth does not provide a sense of the feel of the plane as it cuts into the surface; as it tries to follow the grain of the wood; as it hits an unexpected flaw and how to gracefully shift movement and force to compensate. Repetition reinforces awareness of the depth of such knowledge and gives the craftsperson perspective of their place within a larger collective effort in building up a living archive of tacit knowledge. When medieval journeymen presented their work to a collective of guild masters for approval and advancement, they were being judged against this archive as worthy of adding to it or not (Sennett 59).

The desire to have others see and appreciate one's works is often seen as belonging to art, but craft is arguably the source of this phenomenon. A customer choosing your work over another's and then returning time and time again shows just as much appreciation for the skill of a craftsperson as it may reveal their preference for a 'good deal.' It can even outright defy such economic motivations. This sense of pride and honor has a strong historic precedent not just in the aforementioned journeyman assessment, but also in evidence that members of a medieval workshop notably received honor within the city due to their guild association (53). The better their work and the more they did to add value to the traditions of their guild, the greater their sense of honor. Receiving this sort of recognition encourages a service mentality. Satisfaction comes not from one's own needs being met, but in meeting the needs of others who respect and praise the ability to do so with such a high level of skill. Sennett describes these traditional workshops as spaces that lay out a system where respect is earned, not granted. Obedience to that structure is also encouraged as an avenue towards success and respect based on guild guidelines (54).

This reflects a system of potentially positive Human Rules where making things for the enjoyment and/or benefit of others rewards the maker. This system connects back to the consideration of the 'other' in the making process and forms a feedback loop of mutual respect when approached through the specific mechanics of craftspersonhood. What is distinct here is that the service being entered into is voluntary, not compulsory. This is the defining feature of service in contrast to exploitation and strengthens the development of a skills-based materially aware selfless sense of selfhood.

How Art Differs

The forces contributing to the nature of selfhood within the artist stand in stark contrast to those at play in craftspersonhood. For a long time, many scholars thought of the Renaissance as the genesis of the artist as we know it. However, examination of the abundance of contracts from that time shows that even the most famous artists had more in common with the current notion of a craftsperson than an independent fine artist. Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*, for instance, was not the work of a single creative genius. After securing the commission, Leonardo worked with three other painters and a wood carver to create two primary paintings of the same scene for the contract.



Virgin of the Rocks, Leonardo da Vinci, 1483-1485

In the wake of conceptual art, some may argue that the execution of a work by persons other than the artist does not detract from the individuality of the art's original concept. However, the patron also gave clear instructions that Leonardo and his team were to follow regarding elements such as composition, the characters present, and even the color of the Virgin Mary's robes (Shiner 35). Leonardo seems to be working more as a paid craftsperson than an independent

artist. In fact, ‘fine art’ as we know it did not even exist as a concept in Renaissance Italy (37). So, what changed?

The Free Creative Genius

Much of our praise of Renaissance artists is based on projections of contemporary values into the past through flawed early modern histories (39). Even more perplexing is the way we came to see great artists as geniuses instead of expert craftspeople. The single term ‘genius’ actually comes from the blending of two Latin words—*genius*, or guardian spirit, and *ingenium*, or natural talent—into a secularized metaphysical term in the seventeenth century (66). However the secularization of art, where the artisan was expected to appease the intellectual desires of the patron, began some two hundred years prior to the advent of genius as a secular term. Yes, much of the art of the period was religious in nature, but the renewed interest in Classical Greco-Roman philosophy and mythology created a prerequisite for artists to be familiar with these fields and to incorporate them into their works (46). By the time modern understandings of ‘genius’ arose, there was already a tacit expectation that artists would be involved in some aspect of the intellectual *vita contemplativa*; without which their work would have little societal value to the aristocracy and early capitalists who wielded cultural power. What would come to be defined as ‘craft’ did not suffer the same burden as people intuitively understood that such objects had a more immediate set of practical requirements to fulfill. Ideology and philosophy are secondary to the craft object’s base identity as defined through use and have no direct effect on its functionality and materiality.

By the time artists and artisans were separately defined, this difference was solidified in academic circles. French dictionaries of the time cite ‘genius’ as the defining characteristic of an

artist's work. As Shiner describes it, "...all the 'poetic' attributes—such as inspiration, imagination, freedom, and genius—were ascribed to the artist and all the 'mechanical' attributes—such as skill, rules, imitation, and service—went to the artisan" (111). Of all of these, genius and freedom became key in segregating the nature of the artist and their work from that of the artisan. Following the Renaissance, there was the assumption that genius needed logic and rules in order to best come into being, but this requirement vanishes by the late eighteenth century. People start using 'genius' as a noun, as a title. Logic and rules are seen as undue restrictions on a free and sovereign individual seeking to create. The tradition of mimicking the works of old masters becomes distasteful in favor of making original works. In Germany, a genius was thought to be metaphysically above any and all rules. Their difficult behavior and dismissal of logic was to be tolerated for the sake of the genius' expression which was heavily mystified, thus preventing any serious inquiry into its nature and validity (111-112).

This built up over the centuries and became an accepted truth in Western culture where individuality is primary to one's existence and sense of value in the universe. When Action is given a special place of significance in Arendt's theory of the *vita activa*, it is predicated not just on the assumed value of individualism over collectivism, but also on the idea that freedom is the most praiseworthy thing a human being can pursue. Furthermore, freedom and individuality can only be affirmed through Action as opposed to Work and Labor since the latter can both be delegated to others via exploitation without harming one's sense of agency. She even goes so far as to state that a life without Action "is literally dead to the world" (Arendt 176-177). The anthropocentrism displayed by Arendt dangerously feeds into an enframing mentality as explored by Heidegger which casts humanity as the rightful master of the universe. Everything

becomes a means to express human agency in contrast to the lack of such in nature (Heidegger 332). This is evident in her description of human life as defined by “startling unexpectedness” instead of the logical assumption that any universe capable of generating sentient life via natural selection will ultimately produce a form of life capable of reflection, agency, and self-awareness (Arendt 178).² In such a view, human freedom and agency are not startling. The conditions of the universe that we came to exist within as parts of a greater whole are what is startling.

The discriminatory implications of Arendt’s praise of Action and its connection to freedom is evident in her pugilistic description of a life defined by the products of one’s efforts.

Only the vulgar will condescend to derive their pride from what they have done; they will, by this condescension, become the 'slaves and prisoners' of their own faculties and will find out, should anything more be left in them than sheer stupid vanity, that to be one's own slave and prisoner is no less bitter and perhaps even more shameful than to be servant to somebody else (211).

Shortly after, she borrows the phrase "terrible humiliation" to describe the condition of being limited by one's works and leading an existence dependent on them, not the inverse (211-212).

What is overlooked by many here is how this fits into the enframing mentality as it requires a ‘challenging’ position towards the objects and results one produces. As Heidegger warns, enframing “drives out every other possibility of revealing” as we see with Arendt’s rejection of finding one’s sense of self and agency through anything but Action (Heidegger 332).

As the free creative genius gained more praise, the forces which once tempered their ego became degraded and avoided by those seeking to be ‘creative’ (Shiner 115). The tradition of craft, however, never shed its respect for rules and practicality during this tumultuous shift.

When Sennett claims that “the reality on the ground is that people who aspire to be good

² This is known as the Anthropic Principle in scientific circles. While it is theoretical and has nuanced variants that I cannot get into in this paper, it represents a non-anthropocentric view of humanity's existence that is of use in exploring Arendt’s assumptions as limiting.

craftsmen are depressed, ignored, or misunderstood by social institutions,” he is describing a sense of existential isolation (Sennett 145). The values lauded by craftspeople that are also so integral to their selfhood are seen as antiquated at best and shameful at worst by many in the art world today. Given the celebrity status of many conceptual artists in recent decades, this ridicule is easily adopted by the masses looking to these figures for cultural and philosophical guidance.

Individual Celebrity

The prevalence of celebrity in contemporary culture stretches far beyond the realm of art. Along with movie stars and musicians, there are fine-artist-celebrities like Hirst, Kapoor, Creed, and Koons, and even business celebrities like Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, and Larry Page. Along with creative genius, the idea of individual celebrity is and has been at the core of selfhood for artists in the West.

Shiner calls our attention to the confluence of factors that led to the convergence of the concepts of artist and celebrity through the rise of artist biographies, self-portraiture, and the employment of court artists (Shiner 37). The artist’s biography—Vasari’s famous *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori* is a good example—was of special importance as it situated the artist as the central, even heroic figure of a grand story (40). While the category of ‘artist’ still did not exist, these painters, sculptors, and architects were starting to be seen as special noteworthy figures celebrated for their individual achievements of originality. The rise of self-portraits at the same time visually reinforced the notion of artists as worthy of praise and remembrance. Dürer’s *Self-Portrait* from 1500 with its Christ-like pose reflects how even the artist himself was beginning to buy into this view of their station in the world. Shiner notes that

some critics claim Dürer meant to suggest himself, and by extension other ‘artists,’ as akin to a “divine creator” (40-41).



Self-Portrait, Albrecht Dürer, 1500

However, it was the rise of the court artist alongside these two creative genres that truly began the shift in common perception of artists. Initially, nobles desired to have artisans, not yet ‘artists,’ nearby for the sake of convenience to quickly produce paintings, sculptures, decorative practical objects, and even to decorate their homes. This was often achieved not only by paying the artisan a salary to keep them focussed on Work instead of Labor in the Arendtian sense of the terms, but also by adding them as official members of the court. They were given a lifestyle compatible with the values of the work-free nobility who lived in a realm of pure Action. They were thus free from the rules of the guilds and the toil of bringing their works to market like common craftspeople. Though the daily workings of the artist still involved commissions from their noble patron along with detailed instructions for how they were to be completed, a new facade was given to these highly visible creative individuals that made them seem powerful and important to the general public (42). As pseudo-aristocrats, court artists were easily swayed to

favor the *vita contemplativa* and view the *vita activa* as a necessary evil of their role in high society. They were thus set up to accept an enframing mentality that preserved their power and status.

The Cult of Genius & Pleasure

Enframing, as a worldview, feeds our fascination with genius and our weakness for egotism via celebrity and desire. In its reduction of everything into measured resources ready for use, it casts humanity as supreme in the world, as ruler, with everything else taking on an illusory appearance. There are no more objects or subjects, just measurements, just “standing-reserves” (Heidegger 332). Domination over nature via ability becomes laudable in each person’s mind. As a result, genius is more easily seen outside of the arts as the highest expression of domination over Material Limitations and the forceful reshaping of Human Rules to suit the needs of the individual. As people are also reduced to these standing-reserves, the genius is ‘measured’ by society and can achieve the level of celebrity through the collective praise of their perceived talent. The fact that we speak in terms of someone being ‘more’ or ‘less’ famous/influential betrays this quantifying state of mind. This encourages the idea of every person shaping the world to their needs instead of the inverse. The means of triumph become secondary to the result and justify the forceful reshaping of society to suit the needs of the individual. Anish Kapoor’s exclusive licensing of the *vantablack* pigment for artistic purposes typifies such behavior.



Fig 4: *Cloud Gate* (Anish Kapoor 2006), refinished with the *vantablack* pigment in 2016

While legal, Kapoor's licensing agreement arguably robs this novel material from all other artists who would seek to explore it. This seems secondary to Kapoor's titanic influence and resources and he is unapologetic whenever pushed on this issue. Thus, we see the genius morphed from rebel to tyrant as they are encouraged to exert their will upon reality under the guise of freedom.

Humanity's fundamental relationship to the world is thus changed with illusion becoming delusion as enframing itself is then hidden from view as the new status-quo (332-3). Such insidiousness feeds the image of humanity as supreme with enframing being seen as the 'right' existential relation between the individual and the world. The condition we find ourselves in is caused by what we are trained to see as a cure for the existential dread stemming from a disconnected and instrumental life. Caught up in this is a treacherously misguided pursuit of unbridled intellectualism and the tacit rejection of embodied materialism by thinkers like Franco Berardi. His writing focuses on the horrors of capitalism and the need to move into a more poetic and pleasurable state of being (*passim*). In his *Manifesto of Post-Futurism*, he writes,

We sing of the great crowds who can finally free themselves from the slavery of wage labor through collective revolt against exploitation. We sing of the infinite web of knowledge and invention, the immaterial technology that frees us from physical hardship (137).

Berardi's focus on the eroticization of life through intellectualism and poetics feeds into the illusion of enframing through the deification of freedom as seen in the tyrannical genius. When also declaring that "beauty only exists in autonomy" the Renaissance hierarchy is reinforced: Art is qualitatively better than craft due to its autonomy (137). One of the earliest lines in Berardi's manifesto declares, "We exalt tenderness, sleep, and ecstasy, the frugality of needs and the pleasure of the senses" (136). It is hard to find fault in such a statement without seeming callous and uncaring, yet a clear flaw arises when viewed in the larger context of the manifesto.

The pursuit of a liberation from Work to facilitate a pleasurable poetic form of agency removes Work's positive and tempering role as seen in craftspersonhood. Nothing prevents the emergence of new forms of exploitation in such a post-capitalist society because there is nothing guarding against the unabashed individualism that leads to the enframing mentality. Entertaining the notion that we must free ourselves from physical labor of all kinds to achieve fulfillment relies on a narrow understanding of the issue and overlooks the existential potential of Labor and Work. It is through these two activities that one comes to know the world with a solid anchor in materiality. By taking part in both, one's sense of self is given a solid anchor in materiality. The loss of that anchor isolates us from each other by severing our most immediate and concrete shared experiences.

While the happiness blindly pursued by *animal laborens* is indeed a trivial sort derived from effortless consumption over true fulfillment, similar delusions can occur through the imbalanced pursuit of Work and Action as evidenced in extreme capitalism and unrelatable intellectualism, respectively (Arendt 134). Arendt's greedy consumption-focussed *animal laborens* is less a critique of Labor and more a call for balance in all aspects of one's existence.

As such, it reveals the need for the fourth activity of craftspersonhood in balancing Labor, Work, and Action while also utilizing the reflective strengths of the *vita contemplativa* in order for one to lead an existentially fulfilling life.

Points of Resistance

The chief concerns in the inquiries and arguments above are the aspects of craft practice that most directly influence the formation of selfhood in contrast to those at play in a purely artistic practice. This naturally led to an exploration of how craftspersonhood can be used for the social good against contemporary existential dangers. Though attention has been paid to key aspects of Western art and its implications, a complete exploration of the essence of art has been passed over. A large body of work already exists on this subject as viewed from many fields of study, and furthermore such an essence would have to come about after the fact of craftspersonhood, historically. As a result, it is supplemental to our focus here.

There is also the issue of inherent privilege in studio craft as a movement within the larger history of object making. Its partial rejection of practicality and commerciality, largely possible through the exercise of privilege by many craftspeople of the time and more in line with the artist mentality discussed above, are more directly a commentary on the social and economic situations of the 1960s and '70s. Craftspersonhood was at play in this, but only as a common foundation for the movement and other craft disciplines. Such economic factors affecting this system of selfhood for the better or worse can shape the expression of craftspersonhood at various points in time, but they do not affect its essence. The long historic basis for this essence and its preservation throughout reinforce its more far reaching existence.

The most problematic issue overlooked here is the history of oppression through Work and Labor that has plagued much of Western and now global industrialized culture. Even the word ‘craft’ has been co-opted into this capitalist behavior of exploitation and enframing as seen in its prolific use in advertising. The term ‘hand-made’ may imply a level of craftsmanship as we have discussed here, but that is not the case when applied to mass-produced objects that are touched but a few times during the assembly phase. Advertisers may want us to infer craft-like qualities in such a situation, but that would rely on a fundamental misinterpretation of craftspersonhood and its essence. It is important to remember that craft is neither Work nor Labor and its essence is a means of fighting said oppression from multiple hierarchical levels simultaneously. Craftspersonhood fosters a set of skills and insights that are essential to forming lasting points of resistance within larger systems of exploitation because it has the ability to touch multiple parts of one’s life beyond its primordial focus of object making. It has the power to redefine the pleasure sought in one’s life and offer alternatives to the consumerist impulses we are conditioned to follow.

In times of economic and political uncertainty, people naturally seek points of stability and harmony within their lives. As Korn writes, “Craft’s materiality imposes cooperation on the sometimes discordant factions of the mind [...] Thus the holistic quality of craft lies not only in engaging the whole person, but also in harmonizing his understanding of himself in the world” (Korn 56). At times when one feels in conflict with the world around them and unable to control their environment, craftspersonhood helps unify the self with the world we inhabit. It blatantly accepts the materiality of human existence and the relational truths that define life. Through skilled self-improvement, material awareness, and inspiring a sense of community, craft

encourages a sense of self that leads to deep existential fulfillment in the face of a consumption-centric culture of quantified averages and currencies. If craft is only ever seen as a subservient to art, then these contrasts can never fully come to light. A clear and recognizable philosophy of craft must be pursued to best explore these ideas and their most effective application within politics, ethics, education, and more. Acknowledging and embracing our intrinsic materiality and all that it has to teach us is the first step in doing so.

Bibliography

- Adamson, Glenn. *Thinking Through Craft*. Berg, Oxford, 2007.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958.
- Berardi, Franco. *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*. Edited by Erik Empson and Stephen Shukaitis, Translated by Arianna Bove et al., Minor Compositions, 2009
- Dormer, Peter. *The Art of the Maker*. Thames and Hudson, London, 1994.
- Gladwell, Malcolm. *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. Hachette Book Group USA, New York, 2007.
- Heidegger, Martin. "The Question Concerning Technology." *Basic Writings*. Edited by David Farrell Krell, 2nd Edition, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 1993.
- Korn, Peter. *Why We Make Things and Why it Matters: The Education of a Craftsman*. David R Godine, Boston, 2013.
- Lundstedt, Carl. "The Large Hadron Collider." *Linux Journal*, 19 Oct. 2010.
<http://www.linuxjournal.com/content/the-large-hadron-collider>, Accessed 30 Oct. 2016.
- Sennett, Richard. *The Craftsman*. Yale UP, New Haven, 2008.
- Shiner, Larry. *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2001.

Images and Artworks

- Da Vinci, Leonardo. *Virgin of the Rocks*. 1483-1485, oil on panel, Louvre, Paris.
- Dürer, Albrecht. *Self-Portrait*. 1500, oil on panel, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.
- Jefferson, Thomas. *Monticello*. 1772. Albemarle County, Virginia.
- Riemenschneider, Tilman. *Angel Figurine*. circa 1505, limewood, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.