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Toward a Unified Theory of Crafts

The Reconciliation of Differences

by Paul Mathieu

The differences between art and craft are seemingly obvious to anyone and everyone. Usually, the differences are stated *semantically* in terms of meaning and definition, or *politically* in terms of value, status and hierarchies. Rarely are the differences stated in *conceptual* terms. This positions craft in polarity with art, as if so totally different from art that it is altogether a different phenomenon.

Hierarchies and polarities are interesting and at times useful, but are they really relevant here? For a long time I thought so and I was attempting to resolve the differences as a dialectic between art and craft. In the contradiction of opposites, I made long lists of polarities and dualities (see box at right).

Many of these opposites have been explored in various ways—for instance, art is localized (you know where it goes, usually on the wall, in the gallery/museum space for sure), whereas craft has no locality (it goes everywhere, but it is also nowhere; conceptually, it doesn't fit easily within theory)—and it is a rare text on crafts that doesn't debate the differences. Not surprisingly, all these binaries are hierarchical; in most cases, but not always, they imply that one is better than the other; that art is better than craft.

As my list of polarities developed, I became particularly attracted by the representation/presentation dichotomy. For a while, I thought that the major theoretical and conceptual differences may lie there. After all, art is concerned mainly with representation, with the making of images, be they uni- or bi- or tri-dimensional. Was craft then about presentation? About a certain way of *being*, ontologically, to use a philosophical term?

It's handy to view the world in term of dialectics, binaries, polarities and opposites. In reality, such a simplistic outlook is useless and above all, false.

A few years ago I was teaching ceramics in a university program at the undergraduate level. One day I assisted at the presentation given by a British author, art critic, theoretician and curator who was speaking on his researches to the graduate students in visual arts. His talk was centered on a show he had recently curated, bringing together the very diverse works of a group of Third World artists. His principal interest in these artists lay in his attempt to grasp and understand, at the conceptual level, what were the possible links between these diverse practices, beyond issues of content like colonialism, economic disparity, cultural imperialisms and gender/racial conflicts. One of the artists worked with vessels, dried gourds used in installa-

Art is high	Craft is low
Art is elitist	Craft is popular
Art is visual	Craft is tactile
Art is image	Craft is object
Art is eye	Craft is hand
Art is cerebral	Craft is manual
Art is metaphysical	Craft is physical
Art is conceptual	Craft is material
Art is concept	Craft is precept
Art is idea	Craft is matter
Art is talk	Craft is action
Art is mind	Craft is heart
Art is male	Craft is female
Art is passive	Craft is active
Art is contemplative	Craft is of the world
Art is inside	Craft is outside
Art is asocial	Craft is social
Art is immoral	Craft is moral
Art is false	Craft is authentic
Art is a lie	Craft is truth
Art is individual	Craft is community
Art is personality	Craft is anonymity
Art is innovation	Craft is tradition
Art is beauty	Craft is utility
Art is useless	Craft is useful
Art is museum	Craft is house
Art is cemetery	Craft is home
Art is dead	Craft is alive
Art is Death	Craft is Life
Art is transient	Craft is permanent
Art is immobile	Craft is mobile
Art is space	Craft is time
Art is content	Craft is container
Art is representation	Craft is presentation
Art is framed	Craft is in the frame,
etc.,	etc.

tions, both within nature and the gallery space. Another used embroidery on clothing and fabrics. A performance artist pierced the human body with jewelry and metal works.

Another focused on painted skin, body markings and tattoos. The last one, I recall, used the motif of oriental carpets on large billboards installed in the urban environment.

It is obviously possible to associate such artworks with various practices; i.e. the vessels with anthropology, the jewelry with rituals and status symbols, the embroidery with women's activities, the tattoos with ornamentation and decoration, the carpets on billboards with advertising. Yet, the British curator of the show felt that there must have been a deeper connection conceptually, at the level of theory, among all these works, within contemporary visual arts, one that he could not quite grasp. After his presentation, during the question period, I asked him if instead of looking for an answer within contemporary theory and art discourses, he had ever considered craft theory, since all of the works in his show made obvious references to craft concepts and craft practices. My question surprised him so much that he remained speechless for long seconds, stunned, with his mouth open and eyes bulging. He then assertively said: "No, no, this has NOTHING to do with crafts" (which he pronounced as if it were a dirty word). In his mind, there couldn't possibly be any connection between these works, obviously part of contemporary visual art, and crafts. Meanwhile, the whole assembly was looking at me as if there was a crazy person among them! Someone interjected loudly: "What is Craft theory, anyway?" As if there could possibly be such a thing.

The definitions we have for art and for craft come mainly from art history, a practice still very much stuck somewhere in the nineteenth century. Art theory, an adjunct of art history (yet based mostly on language, literary theory and semiology), hasn't done much better by limiting its vision and neglecting or ignoring certain practices such as craft and, to a lesser degree, design, decorative arts and architecture – practices that are not experienced solely or mainly through language, that operate beyond discourse, that are not just signs.

Contrary to art theory, art practices are evermore inclusive in their approach. The Arts and Crafts Movement, the Bauhaus and most avant-garde manifestoes have all strived to reconcile art and life and to destroy the barriers between practices and media. In various ways, this has been repeated ceaselessly for more than 150 years. In actuality, nothing much has changed.

Early in the twentieth century, Marcel Duchamp showed that any object is/can be a work of art. More recently, Joseph Beuys has expanded this notion to include any activity – breathing, walking, talking to a dead hare – as art. The corollary of these seminal developments implies that there is always art in craft, but not necessarily always craft in art, although strangely enough, often that is all there is, if we understand craft as "skillful making". To put it once again in binary terms, art is less, craft is more. If anything can be art, not everything can be craft.

If we accept these premises that anything and everything can be art (which I do), it automatically implies that anything and everything craft is also art, insofar as craft is simply another form of art, another category within art, like painting, sculpture, photography, design, architecture, etc. But note how the last three – photography, design, architecture – have been more readily accepted as art forms. Is this due to their privileged position within the power structure where art operates? All three can be efficiently exhibited. Conversely, craft objects are not intended to be exhibited. That is not how they operate, how they are meant to be experienced.

If craft is just another form of art, does it mean that it is not in any way distinct, that it doesn't have its own concepts, its own theory. Of course not. *Politically* craft must be a part of art in order to be accepted by the art world, to resist marginalisation and remove institutional neglect. Craft must demand equal political status. Yet, *conceptually* craft remains as different within art as painting remains different from photography. One cannot write or talk about craft – or painting – or photography – without writing or talking about art. But for real change to happen, craft needs to explain itself better. It is in need of a theory. In order to be taken seriously, it must demonstrate its genuine significance and relevance, to paraphrase American craft artist Bruce Metcalfe.

If craft is a category of art, a sub-set like painting or photography, then what about the various practices within craft? What is the relationship between pottery and furniture? Jewelry and fabrics? Glass and metal? Is there a difference solely at the level of materials and their transformation with various tools? Could there possibly be a unified theory of crafts?

Searching for theories of craft, I found practical answers in the essay "Of Other Spaces" (*Diacritics*, Spring '85, Vol. 16, #1) by French theoretician and philosopher Michel Foucault. I wrote at length on this reading in an article, "The Space of Pottery," which was published in *Studio Potter, Ceramics: Art and Perception*, and elsewhere. To summarize, Foucault writes about specific spaces within culture that behave in certain ways: their shared characteristics include universality, a specific relation to time, juxtaposition, ritual, change and transformation. He names these spaces heterotopias or "other spaces," to differentiate them not only from any spaces, but most importantly from utopias, or what we know as art works, ideal, unreal spaces (remember representation). This epistemological approach, defining how we understand and know certain things, helped me greatly to expand my understanding of crafts ("other spaces") as both theory and practice. Even so, it felt incomplete. As theory, it remained too complex, with too many characteristics to be cohesive. I wanted something simpler.

The writings and ideas of others are very useful here. I am very struck by recently-appointed Nova Scotia College

of Art and Design president Paul Greenhalgh's notion of a "conceptual constant" in crafts; that there exists a seamless continuity in time and in society as a continuum; the notion that crafts do not change; that a bowl, no matter when, with what, how, or by whom it is made, is always conceptually the same object. At long last an aspect of craft that is clearly conceptual, universal and timeless!

Elsewhere, others define other constancies within craft as well. For instance, it is generally accepted that among the characteristics of craft objects are medium specificity; a connection with a specific material (clay, wood, fibre, glass, metal, plastic, paper, etc.) and specific technologies (i.e., the kiln, the loom, the lathe, etc.). Also, craft seems by necessity to be made by hand. It is defined by use and by tradition. It implies function and ritual. Above all else, it often seems, craft requires skill. Yet each of these "constants" can be challenged. Is the hand the operative factor? Is tradition? Is function? Is skill? I don't think so. Many objects I would describe and understand as craft are not made by hand, make no references to function, or to tradition (stylistically anyway), are even badly made, often on purpose. And what of virtual crafts, those practices that use the digital space of computers to manifest themselves?

These characteristics of craft—material, tool, making, function, tradition, skill, etc.—are useful in understanding certain specific objects, but for a unified theory they mostly confuse things since, one by one, they all can be contested. Each also implies an opposite and returns us to the unoperational and false dichotomies.

If Art is the umbrella term for all transformative activities, art is any activity or any object, whether existing or yet to be conceptualized or materialized sarcastically, it could be said that art today is anything that *looks* like art—and we all know what art looks like. Art has reduced itself, it often seems, to its own sign. Interestingly, in its attempts to get closer to life, art has appropriated many craft concepts (function, ritual, domesticity, the relation to touch and the body, etc.), yet still rejects craft productions based on these concepts. Art apparently cannot see the value of these concepts unless they are assimilated into its own conventions—yet the theory or theories of art, while in constant flux, nevertheless cannot or will not make room for craft theory. And craft has so much to contribute to art as a phenomenon.

This division between art and craft exists only at the level of institutional academia. It hardly exists at all at the level of practice. From the Renaissance through the Victorian Age, through Modernism and the creation of art history as a discipline, through the rise of theory in this century as well as the ever progressive institutionalization of art, art has been taken away from its practitioners, the artists, and has now become the almost exclusive domain of academicians, historians, critics, curators, theoreticians and all the art bureaucrats. They have created this division

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between art and craft, with all its political implications. There is a great need, I believe, for art to be rescued from these people; for theory to be wrestled from them. If artists don't eventually do it, maybe craftpeople should. The lessons of Duchamp and Beuys have not been learned. The obsession with personality and the myths of celebrity rampant in art circles intent on validating their own Institutions, have prevented Marcel and Joseph's examples from becoming universal.

In 1994, I was asked by *Studio Potter* magazine to contribute an essay on "The Search for a Unified Theory of Crafts." A variety of writers and makers were asked to give it a try. The very diverse responses included analysis of the "moral" aspects and social relevance of craft, the fact that crafts define universal "truths," and the assertion that crafts embody "authenticity" in their potential as documentation and as witness. The essays also repeatedly stated that craft is "making," that craft has a spiritual dimension bordering on the sublime at times—that craft implied "truth" in transformation. Some writers looked into craft's role within culture and society, its cultural value, its historical development, its archeology, as well as its origins in language and its semantic roots. Again, words like "skill, process, material, function, use, ritual, touch" kept recurring. The final result was closer to a confused theory than a unified one.

A Unified Theory of Craft

If the hand, the material, the tool—if skill, function, tradi-

tion, history – if universality, ritual, juxtaposition, change and time – if none of these is of any help since they place emphasis on the transformative and experiential aspects of craft and neglect its conceptual nature what then is the *one* characteristic, at the conceptual level, that is shared by all crafts practices, all crafts objects?

My answer is the concept of *containment*. Containment has to do with the relationship between the object and its environment. Containers bridge an object with its environment. They are about difference as continuity, not difference as rupture. This is readily obvious with ceramics and pottery, but is also true whether pots are made of clay, glass, metal, wood, leather, paper or plastic. If you think about it, at the conceptual level all furniture is also container (a chair, a table, a chest of drawers, etc) as are all clothing and objects made of fabrics. Even carpets and tapestries act as coverings that define a space on the floor or the wall, another form of containment. Jewelry is also conceptually tied to containment: the necklace for the neck, the ring for the finger, the bracelet for the wrist and the brooch as a setting for stones. Beyond its physical properties, jewelry metaphorically contains wealth, status, memory, etc. It is about display, a form of presentation (remember the representation/presentation dichotomy). Actually, the physical properties of containers, and the speciality of ceramic containers, since they are so permanent, is to contain and preserve not only goods and things or bodies, but time and memory itself.

How often have I seen in exhibitions and in museums worldwide, paintings exhibited in frames carved and painted by the artist, where the identification label simply stated “oil on canvas,” with no mention of the frame whatsoever! Total invisibility of the craft object, even when made by the artist himself! Likewise for the sculpture of Brancusi, “Bird in Flight” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, described on its label as “polished bronze,” with no mention whatsoever of an integral component: the plinth, made of wood, marble and cement.

What is also within Art, the ultimate craft object? The frame. The frame is the ultimate container for painting. In sculpture, the equivalent is the plinth. Yet the frame and the plinth (a form of furniture) hardly exist within the art discourse. Does their function render them irrelevant? Could it be because they are closer to craft than to art? The frame or the plinth is the space, the place, the site where things change. Frames create what contemporary deconstruction theory calls “epistemological breaks” or shifts in meaning. In cosmological terms, the frame is the “event horizon,” hiding the singularity within the black hole. Is the frame, the plinth, any less important *conceptually* than the image? Which is more important, the shell or the egg, the bird or the cage? The frame defines a territory; it establishes a frontier. The frame fixes the image and the image is by definition fixed (even with television). The frame, the container is, on the contrary, mobile. You can always change

the frame (and change channels). The frame is the “space between,” it connects to reality and it connects two realities, art and the real world. It is “interstitial,” a term used by American critic John Perreault to define a characteristic of craft objects. In psychology, the term would be the “transitional object”. All of these terms define, in various ways, the operative qualities of frames, of containers, as well as craft objects.

Containers are the ultimate form of abstraction. They never *represent* anything. The resistance toward containers and containment as concept is a resistance to abstraction as concept as well. Abstraction as style, abstraction in its visual and formal aspects has been embraced by art in practice and in theory, yet abstraction as concept hasn't been understood yet. Craft as container – being conceptually abstract – has been misunderstood likewise.

A container is a space where opposites are unified, where differences are reconciled. Containers bring together the extremes in reconciliation; they cancel the dialectical impulses of language. All the binaries, polarities, opposites and dichotomies listed earlier – high/low, art/craft – are reconciled within the container, within any craft object. The container combines in symbiosis the top and the bottom, the front and the back, the interior and the exterior, the surface and the form, representation and presentation, image and object. Even within the new category of virtual crafts, which takes place within the ultimate container, the ultimate frame of the computer screen, this is true.

It is for these reasons that containers as images are playing an ever larger role within contemporary art (think particularly of British sculpture of the last twenty years). By this reconciliation of extremes, a theory of containment, a unified theory of craft brings together art and craft, not as opposites but as complementary. This is why crafts have so much to teach the world, and the art world in particular, both of which constantly strive, it seems, for division and conflict.

And contrary to previous attempts at a theory of craft, this unified theory is not based on history (tradition), a material, a technique, or a body part (the hand). It is based on a concept, which is the very base of theory.

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