

## Hindsight/Foresight

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### HINDSIGHT:

This reflects a very personal, subjective experience. I have never been a member of any craft organization and such organizations have always been useless to me. This is not totally true. At times, I had to join to participate in a craft fair (once, 30 years ago, big mistake) or juried exhibitions (I often won first prize). Through such organizations I also often received important awards and prizes. Thank you. Otherwise, it would have been useless to become a member. In fact, to be associated with craft itself is basically a mistake I unfortunately made. Now it is too late. Let me be clear: I always identified as a potter, I have always defended the legitimacy of crafts in contemporary culture and I have written extensively on the subject, even defining a general theory on objects made by hand (Object Theory at [www.paulmathieu.ca](http://www.paulmathieu.ca), under “writings”). Yet the political side of craft has always been useless to the development of my practice and I have received no support (other than important awards, thank you) from craft organizations. I have never sold my work through their services and when I have applied to show with them or sell my work through them, I have always been rejected. I have actually been physically expelled by the legendary Ms. Watts from the Canadian Guild of Crafts (Montreal) after submitting my work for inclusion. A story too intricate (and funny) to relate here, unfortunately.

I have never made a profit from the sale of my work, never, and I have mostly self- subsidized my practice. To do so, I have repeatedly gone to school and now I teach to fund my studio work. Yet, if it wasn't for all the major grants and awards I have received (thank you), I would have quit a long time ago. So I have received support to DO my work, but very little to none to SHOW my work or even less to SELL my work. This is not unique to my experience, unfortunately. It is very difficult to impossible to show and to sell crafts in Canada. Almost no one collects it, privately or publicly. But the really big problem is that there is basically NO institutional support for Crafts in Canada, even from institutions devoted to the promotion of crafts!

When I started in ceramics in the early 1970's, all art institutions in Canada would show and even collect crafts: the National Gallery, the AGO, the ROM, the Musée de Beaux-Arts in Montréal, the VAG in Vancouver, all of them. Then, it suddenly stopped. Completely (almost). What happened? This is my hindsight.

Two things happened, seemingly unrelated. First professional crafts organizations became very active across the country. They basically served to support their MEMBERS more than the craft community as a whole and they were basically engaged in organizing craft fairs and operating shops for the promotion and selling of cheap gifts. If Crafts used to play an essential role in culture, now they are essentially relegated to providing the marketplace with cheap gifts. Even expensive craft is really cheap gift for very rich people. As an example, the only place where crafts are now welcome (tolerated) in art institutions is in the tacky gift shops found in all galleries and museums, where the selling of crafts (and design, much more prestigious actually)

raises funds for the purchase of contemporary art for the collection! Crafts are seemingly good enough for the gift shop and to generate revenues, but not good enough to penetrate pass the ticket booth. That craftspeople willfully participate in such a travesty is shameful really. In the marketplace, crafts were also relegated to “Craft Galleries” (in actuality “Craft Shops” and the pretentious moniker fools no one). Craft Galleries are very confusing places where no real standards of quality appear to be operating (despite jurying committees). This egalitarian mindset may be commendable but it doesn’t help the field. When you go to an art gallery, any art gallery, the work on view makes sense, one understands the criteria and standards at work as well as the pricing of works. In a craft “gallery” nothing makes sense, particularly the pricing. And the displays are always awful, cluttered and equally confusing. The best stuff is the same price as the worst stuff and all of it is grossly underpriced, fostering the marketing of cheap gifts. Whatever you may say or think about art institutions at least they operate rigorously, something that cannot be said for craft anything. This culture of amateurism rampant in crafts is found everywhere, all the way to the top. The only serious and rigorous place in the country is the Textile Museum in Toronto. I cannot think of another.

The second thing that happened in the early 1970’s is “contemporary art” and “curatorial practices”. If the definition of art was more inclusive throughout Modernism it became VERY exclusive with Contemporary Art. Not everything could be contemporary art and the guardians of the gates were curators (a new, equally perverse phenomenon then too). Also, mediated technologies, “new technologies” (and everything had to be new. Well, if craft is anything it is NOT “new” and it is not mediated!), started to play an ever larger role in that (exclusive) definition. In Canada, this situation was exacerbated by the proliferation of artists run centers. Artists have better things to do than the running of such centers. Quickly, their staffing was given up to bureaucrats and other curators. Now these bureaucrats have very different agendas than artists do. Yet they became very powerful and their vision for art became hegemonic, it was the only one acceptable. They also were politically savvy and had to kiss up to the other bureaucrats responsible for funding and above all they were all careerists, looking for a better, more powerful position in a more prestigious institutions or to get teaching positions in cultural studies programs where their insidious damage could continue. To achieve these goals, no risk could be taken, and orthodoxy had to be followed. Contemporary Art is fundamentally conformist and conventional and it is basically the same everywhere and this phenomenon is now worldwide. In my opinion this is a big problem but nobody seems to mind. Curators are specialists, each one pissing around their small territory and not allowing any intrusion on their authority and expertise. Their interest and knowledge may be deep but it is always limited. Like everything else in the art world it is highly hierarchical. These people all suffer from what I call “artism”, the belief that certain art forms are better than others. Curators became (and are continuously becoming) evermore powerful, and by choosing what is shown, they also dictate what is made. If it isn’t shown it is as if it has not been made. Artists make what curators want. If you don’t, forget it. So we have progressively seen not only the disappearance of art from Art but now the disappearance of artists too. Most “contemporary” artists now are mere curators (and curators see themselves as artists!) of their own practice, selecting, organizing, documenting and presenting their work. Very little is actually made, and if craft is anything, it has to be MADE. That is why such artists are so popular with curators since the curatorial work is already done for them and curators can now fully understand and appreciate such works since it is identical to their own, a bureaucratic and curatorial practice. I generalize grossly here but fundamentally, I am right. We

have also seen the progressive institutionalization of the art experience since the 1970's and art is now relegated to specific places, art galleries and museums. When it takes place outside such institutions, it is mere entertainment (Nuit Blanche, for example). Despite constant talk to the contrary, art is evermore dissociated from life.

Now crafts, in their deep historical and existential connection to life, are in no need of museums and institutions for meaning. Their meaning is intrinsic and is not reliant on context. Yet they need such places for political ends. The gallery and the museum is the ultimate place for legitimacy within culture. If you are not present there, you do not exist.

What about Craft Museums and Galleries? Well, they too are run by bureaucrats and curators. And they too are careerists looking for advancement and legitimacy. So they play the same game and exhibit conventional contemporary art (and Design). If you want to show your work in a Craft Gallery or Museum, your work has to be co-opted, it has to "look" like art (installation or sculpture, be non-functional or at the very least be flat, square and go on the wall, which gives an edge to Textiles here) or Design, but it cannot be craft! There used to be the Institute for Contemporary Culture at the ROM, collecting and exhibiting crafts (like all good colonial Canadian institutions very little of it was actually Canadian since being Canadian is, with making crafts, a true sign of irrelevancy in such places, it too often seems....). Now that the Institute for Contemporary Culture is housed in the new wing of the ROM (a white cube space), they show conventional contemporary art. No place for crafts anymore, unless it is made by indigenous artists. But then, if made by indigenous artists, the craft aspects are unmentionable and insulting to bring up. Do you know that the ROM has a significant collection of Contemporary Korean Pottery!? Yet no Canadian potters are good enough for them! In all the letters I received from the various directors at the National Gallery (and at the AGO, the VAG, etc.) over the years (after complaining to them about their policy, and do you know that the first three years the Governor General Awards were given, the craft winner and there always was one, was NOT even included in the show of recipients at the National Gallery! Can you believe it?) anyway, they all replied that exhibiting and collecting crafts was not part of their mandate and the National Crafts Collection at the Canadian Museum of Civilization was the place in charge. Well, I have been making crafts for 40 years now and as far as I am concerned the Canadian Museum of Civilization is an irrelevant institution and I do not know what they can possibly be doing. Nothing, possibly. It is a ghetto and as such completely unacceptable. In fact the mish-mash that constitutes what could hardly be called a collection is more of an embarrassment than a place where one would want to find one's work. The same can be said for the other ghettos: the defunct Canadian Craft Museum, which nobody misses, the CCGG which is not doing much either. We do not need separate institutions, we need inclusive institutions. Unless crafts are everywhere, they are nowhere. And anyway, Canadian Craft is Canadian Art and Contemporary Craft is Contemporary Art and of all places, the National Gallery should know that!

FORESIGHT:

So what is to be done? My solutions are as drastic and as controversial as my reading of the situation. Fire all curators! Not because they do not do their job but because they do not do the job that needs to be done.

Craft has to get serious. It must move from defining itself through material practices and define itself for what it really is, a conceptual practice. To make craft is to THINK in a certain way. Craft is not a way of MAKING it is a way of THINKING. And this form of thinking is fundamentally different from “art” thinking. In fact, craft is in many ways diametrically opposed to art: it is made, it is physical, it is material, it requires skill, it is functional, it is permanent. It is timeless and “contemporaneity” is irrelevant in crafts. More and more, art is none of these things. The best craft contests art and presents another valid option for cultural experiences. This is where its legitimacy ultimately resides, as a contestation. Yet culture now is about conformity and conventionality, and it is the last place where contestation can be found.

Craft need to change its branding too. The word itself has too much negative baggage to be surmounted. I would suggest “Contemporary Art in Craft Media”, as we say New Media, for example, or even “Contemporary Art in First Media”, as we say First Nations. But I do not like either. In the end, maybe craft/crafts is good enough. There is nothing wrong with the word itself it is the work that has to get serious....

Craft MUST demand equal and fair representation everywhere. Now. Like women artists and indigenous artists before, we must demand to be considered and to be included in all aspects of contemporary culture, including in art galleries and museums, all the way to the National Gallery, as we used to before the early 1970’s. I believe this would not only be our gain but it would be everyone’s gain too. Despite much idle talk of multi-disciplinarity and multi-media in art circles, the world of culture is still highly compartmentalized, not so much at the level of artists and makers but certainly at the level of academia and institutions. It is necessary to gain inclusion, not only for political and financial reasons (and those are vital), but because craft has so much to offer for a renewal of what constitutes art now. Conceptually, Art needs Craft, badly.

Recrafting is actually a recent movement in Contemporary Art and I applaud its potential for exchange and dialogue. Yet when a recent show of “Recrafting” took place at the Western Front in Vancouver, all included artists were conventional artists and no craft artist was included. Imagine an event called “Rejazzing” that would not include any black musician! Yet this is what happens in the art world with impunity. I must acknowledge that this is done rather innocently by such curators, with no real knowledge of what is implied. But there can be no excuse for ignorance and certainly neglect. In fact, I would argue that contemporary art has become so irrelevant within culture that nobody, rightfully, cares about what it is and what it does, even within art itself. Criticality has disappeared, and all that is left is consensus and acquiescence. If any good, craft is fundamentally critical. I can say these things because it will have no impact, nobody cares.

My last recommendation would be for all workers in craft to write a letter (as taxpayers) to the Heritage Minister in Ottawa and demand that all funding to art organizations and institutions, all museums and galleries, be stopped, completely stopped until they change their policy of discriminatory exclusion (which amounts to censorship) around crafts and begin to consider and include contemporary art in craft media in all and any exhibitions and in their collections. Unless this happens, nationally, everywhere, right now, we may as well just give up. I am not holding my breath!