

Abstract

## *Toward Relational Craft*

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This thesis report contends with the contemporary context of studio craft here in the USA. Studio craft is predicated on habits of a modern world, and the political and economic relations comprising our social landscape have left the viability of those habits behind. The framework of studio craft, i.e. the politics that form its enactment, is necessarily shifting with the pressures of the environment. This project identifies this shift as an opportunity to recognize and intervene in these politics, and thus craft's reproductive power. This report focuses

particularly on craft's process of political reproduction as an ideological one, and thus an enabler of the status relations of its contemporary place. In addition, as an ideological process, whether they win or lose in the status reproduction game craft's participants are left unable to account for the relations they promulgate. This report identifies the characteristics of craft's modernist mode, including the dysfunctions buried in the practice of its forms. The report articulates frames for the shifting contemporary landscape that impose new pressures on craft. The report then moves toward modes of intervention in the political landscape that craft both is produced by and reproduces. The field of craft is conventionally assumed as an object moving on its own terms through the world. This report finds instead the field of craft to be an activity, i.e. the sharing of sensibilities which enable action, and those sensibilities to be rooted in the political economic relations of its location. The force of this report then, in interventional terms, is to locate craft's material effects within the site of those relations. Here we can account, and thus take responsibility, for the habits of craft's enactment.



# *Toward Relational Craft*

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Toward Relational Craft

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## Dedication

To my wife Amanda and son Julian. I love you guys.

## In Acknowledgement

Thank you to my committee for their hard work, patience and determination.  
Thank you Ron for your invaluable mentorship. Thank you Tim for stepping up to the plate. Thank you Daniel for critique that I didn't want to hear but was always in my best interest. Thank you Gerald for your tireless support and innumerable stories about working in a parking lot in Detroit. You're right; I've got life by the balls.

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## Introduction

This project is intended as an enquiry into the roles of craft and the discourse that frames it. Craft in the USA has a distinct history, and in having been shaped by particular desires and antagonisms, it fills specific spaces in socio/cultural relations. Craft is often enacted as a vehicle for creative expression which is edified through many significant cultural distribution points, including museums, galleries and prominent private collections. Craft is a strong economic force within which many thousands of people find their livelihood and with which many industries are inter-dependent. Craft has political advocacy, not only because of its economic footprint but also because of its symbolic capital as a culturally defining mode of production. Craft as the latter can carry a variety of associations, especially including ideas of human risk and quality at play. This imagining often becomes embodied in specific types of work and objects, such as weaving or glassblowing. And this brings into view the lifestyle of craft and the persona of the craftsperson. Here we can view the positioning of craft's significance at the intersection of art and anthropology. The preceding elaboration of the space of craft often occurs as an objectification of the idea of craft. This thesis instead seeks to identify its political and economic context; thus an exploration of the spaces of craft and the quality of the relations within these spaces.

The premise of this project starts with the observation that the activities of craft are framed in the habits of an outmoded environment, i.e. the studio. The icons of this movement are figure expressions of the ideals of a productive post war United States: Sam Maloof sculpting wooden rocking chairs in his California version of arcadia or Robert Arneson, making clay sculpture for the fine art museum, all the while maintaining that claywork was "...the world's most fascinating hobby", among many others. (Adamson, Thinking Through Craft 144) These are figures of the American promise of individuality and originality. They serve as object lessons of the potential for us to carve out a space in modern life for real action, for real ends---in other words how we can approach and create an authentic experience. This point of departure is the idea of the spiritualist in the modern world. In studio craft this seems to be a combination of the habits of the studio artist and the enlightened workman. This imagining of craft is still an effectively seductive idea today. With our ever more mediated world --- particularly in the growing de-materialization of the objects of our work-lives --- the question of *what would I do if the electricity went out* becomes a signal for our collective discomfort with contemporary life. It is what makes the figure of Maloof persuasive. This is the general trajectory of the modernist narrative.

Our world has shifted, and while the modern discussion of the craftsman remains, more opportunities and challenges have arisen. This contemporary shift in world view is centered on the informational. This takes many forms, and while our web connectedness is not the only (or arguably the most profound) example, it is perhaps the most useful to engage in the slipperiness of our situation. Our

economic environment has considerably broadened. Surplus value is now measured not only in terms of the durable good but in the attention time of consumers, including the unemployed (a radical shift in the consumer structure). Furthermore, the product of production---its attention gathering---is itself a form of production, as in the production of subjectivity, i.e. the discursive possibility of identity and its creation. In the process, the product has become dematerialized and our boundaries of place and time have become blurred. (Blom 12) For example, work time and free time are no longer so distinct and neither is productive activity devoid of or bounded from passive activity. (Blom 30) Watching television, for instance, generates surplus value and is therefore a form of productive activity. Our economy has shifted from providing us with machinery for living to an encounter with lifestyle. (Blom 12) This is a profound opening in the discursive possibilities of self and individual autonomy. This goes hand in hand, however, with purer and more abstracted forms of exploitation. Thus, the focus on authenticity in our contemporary life has been replaced with skepticism and ambivalence. It is clear that the activity of craft is neither an autonomous site of the real nor is it a vehicle for pure expression. Instead, it has always been an activity of economics, politics, lifestyle and subjectivity---which is another way to say that craft is an enactment of the relationships of the ideas of self and other.

We come face to face with this in many ways. With our proliferation of information and new freedoms of subjectivity, simple answers to our questions become slipperier and the questions themselves lose foundation. For instance, as producers of objects, how should we approach the materials we work with? As

raw material? As renewable resource? As embodied energy of earth-power? Likewise, as the craftsman wears both the hat of the designer and laborer, how should we relate to labor production, profit, and the investor's first say? And in how many ways does that affect the idea of craft? In engaging in this discussion, the modern framework of the craftsman proves inadequate. The force of this thesis then is to exceed the modernist account and come to grips with craft as a relational site. This report seeks to contend with our history of modernism and our socio/institutional engagement with craft. It will articulate through a deconstructive/discursive type of analysis craft's modernist equities. Further, it will locate strategies of intervention and enactment. This report is joined to my graduate thesis exhibition which was held in the Wellington B. Gray Gallery at East Carolina University School of Art and Design from May 15- June 20, 2011. This exhibition represented praxis of craft as a relational site, and a discussion of the merits of this activity is included here in the report. Suffice it to say, the breadth of this undertaking presents numerous challenges to critical enquiry. The character of this engagement is multiple and discursive, and therefore lends itself to the unresolved. I believe, however, that this is in keeping with the productive possibilities of a relational site---the goal is not to be definitive, but adequate. To that end, this thesis project will focus on articulating a theoretical structure that can enable practicable action. This then, is an enquiry into the possible processes of a relational craft.

## A Brief History of Reform

Craft reformism has a long history in our modern era and we can trace its formal activation to a particularly European ways of being in the world. The ideas of John Ruskin are usually credited for setting the stage for the movement, although we could point to a number of figures and cultural pressures that enabled it. Early craft reforms took practical form in the activities of William Morris, Charles Ashbee and later the communal furniture-makers Sidney Barnsley, Edward Barnsley and Ernest Gimson, in an English imagining of Arts and Crafts. Here in the United States, a similar communal craft revival was taking place in the form of the Roycroft intentional craft community in Aurora, New York. The furniture designed by Gustav Stickley was a commodity embodiment of this ideal, i.e. a formation of consumption as craft reform and certainly not production. These are figure examples of a durable if uncritical movement---here embodied in the idea of an ethical production process or the portable ethic of the product of that process. This movement established the feel of ethical industry as a reaction to the contaminating effects of urbanization and industrialization.

The history of craft reform has had significant influence on the way we frame and enact many different socio/institutional activities. Art and design are fields of production that have rather obvious association with the habits of the Arts and Crafts movement. Perhaps less obviously, the US educational system has been (and remains) deeply influenced by notions from craft reform. In terms

of the former, craft reformism is evident in our attitudes about craftwork, which tends to be humanized and moral and not vocational or industrial. It is evident in our collective humanizing of the craftsman, as perhaps a person who knows the world more clearly through the work they do with their hands. In terms of the latter field, the attitudes of craft reformism are apparent in the ideas of *praxis* that frame most public school lesson planning as well as the popularity of alternative schools that radicalize the notion of learning through doing. This is all to say that these reformist ideals stake their claim in the objectification of the process and product of production, and as if their economic and political instance could be separated from them. In order to better understand the idealization, it is important, however, to move beyond the objects that give craft reform its look. The white oak panels and steel strap hinges of a Stickley cabinet is a strategy to embody values. These values are connectable to a wider mode of reform, established in the narrative above in the transition from art and design to educational initiative. Craft reform is above all a mode of production and reproduction, and especially in terms of the values that comprise it. It is valuable to this enquiry to uncover the context that has been displaced in the idealization of craft.

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and the United States was a hotbed of antagonism. The United States (1861) and France (1789, 1830 and 1848) had just been through protracted and bloody civil wars. Dramatic industrialization framed the relations of these places, and it brought concomitant displacement of skilled labor and the proletarianization of a new urban workforce

(exemplified by the mechanization of the weaving process, for instance). The profit of industrialization went to a few powerful investors compared to the vast majority of disenfranchised poor. In the U.S. and Europe the population of middle class people was very small by today's standards, and thus offered little buffer against antagonism from the disenfranchised. European investor's had the luxury (in terms of their position in class antagonism), however, of a foil in the form of the old aristocracy. While the logic of ownership had long since been relocated from the divine right of the aristocrat to the hyper-individuating rights of the investor, the aristocracy represented the age old intractability of class conflict. Thus the symbols of aristocracy could be managed for affect. The Arts and Crafts movement was critical in establishing the aristocracy as the focus of this class antagonism. The movement took direction and was sustained as an investor class idea. It was enacted through the celebration of the designer/craftsman as the figure of individuality and sought to produce luxury commodity for the wealthy (and thus cultural symbol for the public). These products took form, following Ruskin's cue, as a neo-Gothic idealization, or as a reaction to the decorative flamboyance of the aristocracy. Further, it located the logic of its production in functionalist, and thus reified, modes of labor. Thus the investor class sought to escape culpability through their manipulation of the feel of ethical labor and the look of its product.

In the U.S., there was no direct aristocratic tradition. Reform thus took a different shape. The investors did have the advantage of a working class that was splintered by internal antagonism and so they did not have to face a true



solidarity movement. To be clear, populist movements were active in opposition to the exploitative environment, including labor and agrarian movements. There were also incidents of radical and violent opposition on the part of these groups, often in response to extreme acts of state violence. The wide ethnic and cultural differences that characterized the US population proved however, to be too divisive for sustained political action. (Zinn 253) Further, they had a government that, although responding slowly to the economic threat of monopoly, was particularly pro industry in their desire to continue expansion west and further industrialize. (Zinn 258) The division of status between the rich and poor in the USA would thus seem to be more stable than that of Europe, but the investors were also proactive in managing their position. For instance, they established a university system that was accessible to a growing number of people. According to historian Howard Zinn this enabled a new class of middle managers to come into being, created as a buffer for the investor class against the antagonisms of the exploited. (263) This specific act proved highly effective in creating a cultural pressure valve. To the point of this “report”, the ideas in general of paternal philanthropy and humane idealization are central to the relations of production of craft reform. The European world and those taking its frame from Europe were grossly inequitable and politically unstable. And craft reform and the ideas that frame it had mediatic power, enabled by the investor as part of a larger mode of paternal mediation. Craft reform, in so many different forms throughout the years has been an upper class activity performed on the poor, and at best was a romantic activity of condescension and at worst an effective incidence of

interpellation. Craft reform thus idealized production and its product, romanticized the laborer and privileged work ethic over a more whole social ethic. And this was all done through the lens of the investor, and ultimately for their best interests. The point here is that craft reform had and has crucial power in the formation of the relationship of the worker to work and the visibility of humanist ethics---and certainly not from a neutral position.

But how can we imagine craft reform as a more equitable activity?

Certainly our civic engagement with work is critically important today. Just as our idea of *work* has opened up appreciably with new considerations of production, commodity and surplus value; so has the need grown for an effective imagining of *civic engagement*. I believe craft offers the potential for embodiment of this in re-imaginative terms. It has a strong institutional presence i.e. economic viability and political advocacy. It has a history of active social engagement. It also offers possible modes of production and consumption as models of a more ethical and comprehensive industry. The trick here is to not recapitulate but to re-imagine. Thus reform in the sense of civic engagement is the re-formation (presenting new form for) of our habits of production and consumption. This paper takes its cue from the idea that craft opened up can be a significant vehicle of re-form.

## The Place of Craft

Craft today has political advocacy and a large economic constituency. According to the comprehensive survey of craft artists completed in 2001 by the Craft Organization Development Association (known as the CODA survey), craft consumption in the United States that year was \$13.8 billion. (CODA n. pag.) To put this in context, this is comparable to our national personal expenditure on fuel oil and coal. (CODA n. pag.) While anecdotal evidence points to a recent decline in consumption concurrent with our declined national economy, craft-work maintains a sizeable commodity footprint. The estimated population of working craftspeople is, again according to CODA, six times the size of self-described painters and sculptors. (CODA n. pag.) Craft-work is sold throughout the United States in galleries and fairs. It is advocated for by private and public institutions like The American Craft Council and The National Endowment for the Arts. It is also celebrated and directed (as institutional activities) by prestigious institutions like The Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C. and The Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England. Our recent history of the institution of craft evidenced booms of interest in it, notably a counter culture revival in the seventies that announced the mass arrival of *studio craft* and a consumption boom in the nineties concurrent with an economic boom. Throughout the span of

history of post war United States, craft has maintained relatively considerable economic viability. Craft education was once the province of the apprenticeship, and in Europe the practice is still carried on, although to a lesser degree. The apprenticeship in general (and especially in the United States and Canada) has been supplanted by the workshop and the university. These latter two vestiges of Arts and Crafts reform create in themselves (outside of the CODA survey) a considerable economic footprint. They also perform (along with other institutional apparatuses) the activity of enacting craft within the narrative of fine art. Today we are seeing a potential shift in the vocational structure of craft as new modes of production concurrent with new modes of information delivery systems have sparked what could be called a D.I.Y (do it yourself) craft movement. Here the internet takes center stage as medium for social exchange, broadening the possibilities for the acquisition of skill, community building and market exchange. We are perhaps starting to see a qualitative change in the texture of craft, potentially affecting norms of quality, degrees of competence and terms of access. Although this phenomenon has little footprint in the discourse surrounding craft, we can observe from it that the apparatus of craft is flexible and its viability beyond the twenty-first century is being renegotiated in terms of the changing political economic climate. As it is, craft is performed as an activity of production and consumption with a high degree of efficacy within the context of the culture industry---and it looks to be so into the future.

The economic scale of craft shows that it is more than of niche concern. As mentioned earlier, craft also carries great political importance---and not only

because of its economic presence, but importantly because of its carrying capacity for cultural symbol. As such, we can start with the question, *why is craft as a field of discrete disciplines celebrated in such spectacular fashion and what are the horizons of that space of recognition?* One way to grab onto this question is through its anthropological character. William Goodell Foster at the turn of the twentieth century coined the term “contemporary ancestor” in describing southern Appalachian craftspeople. (qtd. in Adamson, *Craft and the Romance ...* 15)

Among a complicated and ambivalent logic of significance, craft has maintained this perception. This is an important point of departure as, rather than defining craft, it sets out our cultural desires in the act of signification. To be specific, the term *contemporary ancestor* both sets the tone for the condescending frame of the anthropological moment and sets out the racial bias of the signification of “American” craft. In this way we see craft as the invented history of the productive activities of white European colonizers. I say invented because the representative disciplines of craft: glasswork, woodwork, metalwork, fiberwork and claywork; have been shaped by pressures from commodification, proletarianization, changing technologies and changing social landscapes. They are in every sense contemporary practices of production and not the anachronism that their perception would lend. Further, craft is signified as a whole field, as if its constituent disciplines are a complete landscape of traditional productivity. What is there to say, for instance, that these are more significant activities than soap making, or perhaps for the environmentally sensitive, early embalming? The activities of the apparatus craft are ennobled and personified for

social, re. political and economic reasons, and are not the pure acts of a bygone era as they may seem. The racial bias of craft's significance similarly becomes apparent with little analyses. For example, the varied cultures of American Indians had and have craft traditions, certainly, but neither are they recognized as "American" craft-work nor conceptualized in the same way. The argument for the institutional activity of craft is made in the muddy interstice between the static position of heritage and the dynamic position of invention. Craft work is presented in cultural history museums and in fine art galleries. Its mode of operation can be said to be multiple and its viability diverse. Cultural perceptions of American Indian craft, on the other hand, position it as monolithic and static. And as the artist James Luna articulates with startling power, this perception, i.e. the activity of cultural acquisition, is thoroughly racist. To elaborate, the natural history museum presents as frame for American Indian visual culture and thus anthropologically qualifies it as the product of "the other". It is defined and catalogued, and thus made ineffectual and static, for the consumption of its enlightenment informed viewer. In Luna's 1987 exhibition/performance *The Artifact Piece*, he enacted a powerful challenge of and intervention in just this ideologically perpetrated sensibility. In San Diego's Museum of Man, and among an exhibition of Kumeyaay Indian artifacts, he presented himself prone on a vitrine-like pedestal wearing nothing but a loin cloth. A closed vitrine nearby encased some of his personal affects, some of which were identifiable as "American Indian" and others as affects of contemporary life. Labels surrounding him identified his name and commented on some of his physical characteristics.

Through anthropological administration (i.e. the dispensation of a sensible logic), we expect access to the dead culture of the “ethnic”. James Luna instead offered as dissent his own living body, and not as “ethnic” but as an individual assigned that label through the lens of a colonizing European worldview. (*The Artifact Piece* n. pag.) Here is the languishment of historicism, and craft must contend with this as well. As a product of Western Europe, however, it has a leg up. It is presented not as “the other” but as “the self” as it once was. It is cherished as one would an heirloom. In this way, the activities of “American” craft have had the opportunity to be re-contextualized. As an institutional object with a seemingly internally justified significance (which is to say a dispensed sensibility that enables a population to manifest as cultural stakeholders), craft has proven capable of being harnessed for the production of subjectivities and commodities of contemporary interest. In other words, “American” craft has become an economic and political force of the present through its signification as an artifact of the past. This is not a perfect solution for craft, however. Because craft is multivalent and its identity slippery, craft’s position within fine art and industry proper---the two poles it bounces between---must be, through the logic of the day, subordinate to “purer” activities. It is a fine art activity enmeshed in mundanity and an industrial practice that compromises its economic viability for the aesthetics of its enactment.

Early craft reform and its recapitulative form as studio craft takes as its starting point the autonomy of the site of craft. This has been expressed many different ways with, just as example, John Ruskin’s insistence on the

interweaving of art and industry or perhaps the natural integrity of materials espoused by mid-century U.S. designer George Nakashima. Whatever the argument, we must acknowledge these insistences of an autonomous craft as the desires of the participants and not the reality of the event. We must come to grips with the necessity that craft is shaped through and is a shaper of the pressures of the society in which it is enacted. It is no more intrinsically ethical than it is intrinsically racist. The opportunity then is for productive intervention in the habits of formation, and thus the reproductive power, of craft.

As established, craft as an Institutional apparatus has a significant and powerful political voice. Like other institutional apparatuses, craft's activities act as a dispenser of cultural logic and producer of embodied form for a political economy. The activity of such is the kernelizing of information into ideologically transmittable sensibilities. Craft in practice transposes through its cultural feel a sophisticated overlay of antagonisms---maybe, for example, in the structure of a cultural "self" or the value of labor--- into intuitions. These have profound repercussions, which because the antagonism is effaced, are naturalized along with the affect. This is a crucial reason to be rigorous, not only in terms of craft, but with the breadth of our hyper-ideologized contemporary environment. Today I believe that we are experiencing the tragic repercussions of ideology run amok. The examples are plentiful and far reaching, and those of us searching to rectify our negative impact are confronted with increasingly complicated layers of self-



destructive complicity and in-affect. Recycling, for example, is not the radical environmental panacea that it was presented to us as. Many researchers argue instead that it has actually shifted the onus of environmental exploitation from industry to the consumer to the detriment of our planet. (Chapman 4) This is just one example of how the old-world-order of streamlining and efficiency, i.e. the pervasive pressure to simplify, is proving an inadequate strategy. If we are attentive, there is plenty of cause to engage with our impacts and sophisticate the narrative of our processes in order to understand the complicated antagonisms embedded within them and address them in a more ethical way. We simply cannot account for the choices we do not know we make.

## Exploring the Dysfunction of the Place of Craft

As explored earlier, Craft is enacted as both a fine art and industrial activity, but in ways that must diminish Craft in order for the latter to make their cultural case in autonomy. The first question that begs asking is *why must these institutions make their case in autonomy, and what does that mean?* In answering this we must first realize that autonomy takes on a breadth of meanings. We can see it from the stance of spiritual insularity, exemplified by perhaps Joseph Beuys among many others, that describe mundanity as contaminating and feel they can transcend it, to the autonomy espoused by Pierre Bourdieu for the field of sociology, which is a case for the demarcation for what that field can question on its own terms in order to enact rigor and clarity. Both fine art and industry use the breadth of this spectrum to administrate their significance. Perhaps this is why we can find the antagonism of Joseph Kossuth iconized on the one hand in fine art and Torstein Veblen within the field of economy on the other; two voices who respectively challenged the structural foundations of their disciplines, and yet were lionized by the institutions they attacked. I would argue that their respective inclusion in the archive were not merely acts of conciliation, but also administrative acts of inoculation. The administration of a field of significance is the perpetuation of that field. To the

point, the celebration of Kossuth and Veblen enacts a flexible and multivalent process of administrative reproduction on the institution's own terms.

I believe the reasons for the institutional argument for autonomy is varied. Among them is a historical pre-disposition based in the up-take of a capitalist mode. Our contemporary understanding of the world is shaped through the imperatives of this mode and it is relatively new, at least not more than five centuries and by some accounts considerably less. Here we note a political and economic shift that ruptured the primacy of the feudal landlord and separately saw the compulsion for people to act according to market imperatives. (Meiksins Wood 11) In particular, English property rights in its specific feudal system and the class struggle between wage-laborers, tenants, and landlords enabled the historical conditions for the rise of capitalism. This English system evidenced an exceptionally large proportion of land owned by the lords, which was worked both by the tenant class and the wage-laboring class. The working class people found themselves in a position where they could not sustain their livelihood without responding to market imperatives, i.e. the need to specialize for market demand and to produce competitively. In addition, the landlords were increasingly dependent on the production of the working class. (Meiksins Wood 15) This had two important effects. First, the lords had incentive to increase their land holdings and this in turn put pressure on the working class to produce effectively in order to maintain productive control of the increasingly valuable land. (Meiksins Wood 17) Secondly, it enabled the landlords to reproduce their situation primarily through ideological and not coercive power. Governance could then become

centralized under absolutism, and move away from the fiefdom. The activity of politics was thus dislocated from the site of economics (Meiksins Wood 15), and if feudalism can be viewed as “the organic unity of economy and polity”, then this schism marked the beginning of the end of feudalism. (Meiksins Wood 13) It is important to note that the transition from feudalism to capitalism was a historical experience based in the specifics of its situation, and not an evolutionary certainty. Capitalism became the dominant mode through the relationship of people to exchange and in particular to the modes and rules that establish the pressures for individuals to act. Capitalism’s particular effectiveness is in its capacity to reproduce itself through the pressures it enacts. Specifically, its reproductive power comes from the effectiveness with which these pressures are subsumed and interpellated. It relied on legal and administrative innovations like the rise of international trade and the invention of the corporation as most historical accounts offer, but most importantly in its reproduction. Thus the primary cause for the rise of capitalism was the transformation of attitudes based in the pressures of the encounter with the market place. And its durability was based in its ability to reproduce its conditions ideologically. Capitalism thus established the primacy of individual rights and responsibilities as well as establishing individual self-interest as the prime motivator of relations. The transitional period from feudalism saw the rise of many reified forms of reproduction: the invention of the corporation as a purified economic individual and the invention of an autonomous field of fine art in order to secularize and individualize cultural authority. This narrative is especially important in terms of

this thesis project because these attitudes are part and parcel of the capitalist experience and in terms of a material context. It is even more certain today that these attitudes are produced within the site of capitalism and reproduced as if they were not. In the words of sociologist Ellen Meiksins Wood,

“Material life and social reproduction in capitalism are universally mediated by the market, so that all individuals must in one way or another enter into market relations just to gain access to the means of life. The dictates of the capitalist market---its imperatives of competition, accumulation, profit-maximisation, and increasing labour-productivity---regulate not only all economic transactions but social relations in general.” (6)

We invented a new world order, but not from thin air. The pressures of the market enabled the conflation of the idea of the individual, and over time this has become sacrosanct. And just as the relations of the English feudal system formed the inventory for the material forms of capitalism, we in turn use the relationships of our past as inventory for invention. Thus the perpetuation of autonomy in the sites of state apparatuses is directly related to the formation, reproduction and concretization of these attitudes in our past.

Despite attempts to bring the group back into significance, as in socialism or perhaps pluralism etc., the idea of *self* has only gained traction---and our global economy is proof of a purer, if tragically destructive, version of this desire for individuality. For example, in our “first world” (which is an expression of

significance *from a first world perspective*) experience, we are immersed in a landscape of commodity as radical de-materialization. The durable good has been replaced by the *idea of the good* and its ability to act as a vehicle for subjectivity and experience. (Blom 38) The prime question of this exchange has become not *What do you want?* but *Who do you want to be?* The logic of the day takes orbit around the consumption of the possibility of self and the ownership of ideas. (Blom 38) This is a sophisticated and contested experience as the convolution of new legal fields of property attest. This signals a movement away from a frame of positivism and the modeling of “real world” experience, and as a more abstracted and internalizing experience---perhaps akin to the radicalization of a fetish commodity. All this while the “third world” (again a first world designation) have been mobilized for production and plundered for resources. Our global economy is in many ways a recapitulation of its colonial roots. As economist Robin Hahnel describes, “Even if international markets are competitive, free market terms of trade will aggravate global inequality in the normal course of events.” (186) So, fine art gained significance and remained so because of its insularity---its enactment as an institutional apparatus and its celebration of the unmediated self. Likewise, industry makes its case with the investor and the rights of the individual as paramount. The point here is that our collective starting point of the valorized self has a history. It was imagined and shaped through competing desires and does not exist *a-priori* of the relations of the mode of its production. And despite its utopian promise, it exists only through the denigration of the idea of *the other*.

The mode of individual autonomy can also be understood in circular, i.e. homologous, terms. In order for Fine Art to be significant, meaning economically and politically viable, it wagers its stake in the way that other institutions do--- autonomy. This means, of course, that it garners its institutional importance from others that set the measure. Science, for example seeks to question and answer from the position of an internal necessity, i.e. the scientific method. Liberal arts education makes its claim on the value of the unmediated experience to the individual. The economic market stakes its claim on the invisible hand and the drive of informed individuals to contract in their own best interests. The institution of government relies on its internal justification of (the fiction of) consensus in many varied forms, but at least including the ideologically reproduced consensus of the willingness of the population to be governed. In this way, each of these institutions set out a sensible logic for achieving importance. Further, because autonomy is a sensibility, each of these institutional actions rely on each other for the promulgation of the primacy of the idea.

The idea of autonomy acted out as a frame has a multitude of negative functions that are becoming increasingly apparent---even as the regressive quality of these institutional positions is re-consolidated. In terms of fine art's activity, autonomy allows the effacement of the political and economic motivations of its production. Fine art gives visual shape to our cultural positions and sets out a powerful and seductive sensible logic. It privileges modes of production, display and archiving, and visibilities and through the force of its own significance sets out these as possibilities of cultural production. We can see in

the primacy of the artist as genius, the alibi for the exploitation of the investor. We can find in its effacement of social significance and celebration of the artist's concept, a desire for the authority of individual control and justification for the activity of ideological transmission. We can see in its celebration of "self" the denigration of the "other"---those whose interests lay outside the dominant sensibility, i.e. non-males, non-whites, non-Europeans, non-industrial etc. We can see in its mercenary manipulation of the environment, whether as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* or more subtly the ownership and mastery asserted through the ephemeral works of Andy Goldsworthy, the exploitative right for mastery of the land indicated by the term "sustainable development".

In like manner we can find that our global economic market evidences tragic dysfunctions woven into its structure of autonomy. For example, its foundation of informed individuals negotiating according to their best interests cannot account for the endemic problems of external costs in the production/consumption cycle. Neither can it account for the problem of the free rider in its management of the common good. (Hahnel 89) As Hahnel states about the endemic problem of the free rider in free-market economies, "Unless the private benefit to each consumer of a ...public good exceeds the entire social cost of producing a unit, the free rider problem will lead to underproduction of the public good." (105) Hahnel further states, "'Free riding' is individually rational in the case of public goods...but leads to an 'effective demand' for public goods that grossly underestimates their true social benefit." (89) Global warming is one topical example of how these problems are interwoven and intractable. Pollution,



which research has clearly tied to the problems of global warming, is a cost of the commodification cycle that industry has for years been incentivized to externalize. The wellbeing of our planet and the health of countless people have been victimized and the social cost has been unpaid by the beneficiaries of the economic transactions that produced it. We are in a situation where we must try to account for these dysfunctions of economic trade in economic terms, which is the inadequacy of the actuarian---putting a dollar number on well being. Further, we are inhibited from taking responsibility for these costs because some will opt out and thus take advantage of the group effort for the common good for free. In a market based on leveraging power for our self-interest, we are, in fact, incentivized to be that free-rider. These problems are pervasive, and like fine art, are indicative of the structural flaw in the fetishization of the individual as autonomous.

The intention of this section has been to locate the framing elements of craft, thus establishing its place. Further, in articulating some of the horizons of those frames---including some of their negative functions and dysfunctions---this established a contextual relationship to craft. The rhetoric of craft has long since insulated its presence. The work in this section, however, establishes a history and therefore a context for it. Context is the necessary precondition for critical analysis and this is the trajectory of the next section of this report.

It is worth noting that this report has used the idea of the institutional apparatus, as in the apparatus of craft, to effect. This is in keeping with the

sensibility perpetuated through craft. “American” craft is envisaged as a distinct and corporal entity. More importantly, the objectification of the activity of craft offers a strategy to isolate the idea of craft and its constituent affects. This is dangerous treading however, and worth a point of clarification. In taking a cue from Louis Althusser, we should note that there is no institutional apparatus (as ideological apparatus) outside of its activities. In reifying the activity, we risk compounding the ideological affect. The progression of this report then is to elaborate on the institutional activities that make the objectification possible.

## The Place of Craft: Articles of Art and Durable Goods

The institutional activities of craft have certain cultural statuses relative to other activities. For example, how does the cultural capital of a *crafted* chair relate to an industrially produced one? How would that same chair relate to a fine art sculpture using like materials and technology? And how far in fact can we move away from the trope *chair* and still feel confident in comparing status relations? These are obviously not analytical questions, but ones keying on the imaginative use of metaphor. They are not substantive relationships at all but imagined ones, and critical in the status relations we set up for ourselves in relation to the world. What we find in these relationships is a tendency toward ideological reproduction. The relationship of a *crafted* chair to an industrial one is not really an external relationship of objects, but a relationship of one's identity to their perception of these objects. Further, these objects do not carry their status internally but are assigned that based on our relationship to the status relations of other people. The effacement of the relationships of people acts to naturalize and thus concretize those relations. This is common practice, and evidenced from our judgments of fashionable dress to fashionable speech, etc., which is to say judgments on forms as if they are good or bad in their own right. The idea of the modernist art object perhaps represents this habit most directly. Here the

perception that an object could be a vessel filled with a portable and a-historical presence is the example *par excellence* of this ideological thinking.

The activities surrounding craft have certain status positions notable as institutional facts. While they may seem to express these on their own terms, they are in fact status relations based on perceptions about the norms of perpetuated sensibilities. Status and taste is an ascriptive process based in homologous sensibilities and their distribution and acquisition. The activities of craft occupy multiple cultural spaces, and therefore they are assigned varied and ambivalent statuses. Craft's logic of cultural production, for example, allows it to flit between the poles of expressive art and commodity production. Within either of these fields, however, craft is assumed as a contaminated version of the respective mode. It contains in the logic that enacts it contradictions to the modes it is represented within. Craft is tied closely to material production, histories of skill and technology and forms of embodiment. In terms of its inclusion as a fine art, craft is limited by the mundanity (from the fine art vantage) of its own logic. Likewise, as a mode of commodity production, craft sacrifices much of its productive power for the aesthetics of its enactment. How can artisanal practice justify its dismissal of the efficiency of the division of labor, for instance, and still be taken seriously as a production mode?

Throughout crafts modern history, great energy has been expended to rehabilitate craft's status. Often this includes re-imagining the constituent contradictions within craft's logic that cause the problems. For example, when we

look at the end of craft staking its claim in the fine art field, we note tendencies to elevate strategies of the avant-garde (originality, rupture, abstraction, etc.) while diminishing associations of production (function, materiality, skill, etc.). Still another version of craft may stake its claim to design modes that mark significance for commodity design. In the discourse surrounding the Furniture Society, for example, the use of CNC (computer numerically controlled) production and computer modeling have become increasingly fashionable. The work of artist/educator Rich Tannen, for instance, has been showcased frequently by the Furniture Society. These objects are recognizably traditional cabinet-work with stylistic associations with studio furniture of especially the 1990's. The surfaces of these objects, however, are carved in undulating patterns made possible through CNC machining. (Tannen. n. pag.) This is an obvious example of technological rupture of the logic of artisanal process. This carving would be impractical if not improbable as an artisanal mode. Industrial processes are thus included in the visual inventory of craft---and on their own terms.

Glenn Adamson, in his book *Thinking through Craft*, notes a sense of fruitlessness to this conciliation, especially in regards to the changing political economic conditions of cultural production:

As a field of production, studio craft is still unswervingly devoted to the creation of “objects”. It is defined by the mastery and enactment of a set of readily identified actions (throwing a pot, making a basket, etc.). And

as its very name suggests, it has not yet begun to grapple with the realities of the “post-studio” environment. (166)

The romance of the workspace [the studio] having been comprehensively dismantled...elsewhere in contemporary art is still alive and well in the crafts. (168)

Adamson finds that as craft continues to make its claim for status equality within the modes of its production (for his analysis the field of fine art), the frames of the field have shifted. Thus craft’s argument has not only lost persuasiveness, but their reasonable structure.

I believe Adamson’s (and others, more on later) analysis of craft’s denigration provides strategic access to the frames of the respective fields for intervention. And so rather than merely attempting redress for the status inequity of craft versus art and industry proper (which on its own terms proves practicably futile) we need to look at the partial denial of craft’s cultural worth within the horizons of our social habits embedded in fine art and industry. Through the dissensus of craft, for example, we can see attitudes of autonomy played out as the fallacy of desires, as our fine art habits fail to contend with the politics of their own enactment. Art Nouveau jewelry cannot efface, for instance, the ostentation of its patronage---specifically the wearer garnering the distinction of this style of adornment---however hard it tries to make its case in autonomous beauty. International style furniture, likewise cannot sidestep its interest in the promise of industry and their new (twentieth century---and continuing even now into the

twenty-first century) mass market-place, despite their case for utopian universalism. As institutional moments of both fine art and industry proper, these denigrated sites allow critical enquiry into the arguments of these practices. Through enquiry, they can become activities of fine art without the obfuscating abstraction and industry with more than individual incentive in mind. Craft in this way establishes a signpost toward uncovering the inadequacy of, and developing intervention into, what seems an intractable position of regressive sensibility. This lens positions contingency and heterogeneity within the institutional activities of ideological compression. It complicates the coordinates of sensibilities that establish our habits of art and industry, and short circuits the streamlining that packages it as conventional wisdom. The enabling end of this conceptual framework is discursivity---the opening of dialogues that question the structure and the stake of our activities of production and consumption. This is not *merely* of theoretical concern. The aim of this type of intervention in our sensibilities is to open up relationships to questions of context, for example: the denigration of labor power, the civic efficacy of (a) population(s) and the industrial exploitation of our natural environment, among others.

As offered, craft can play an important role in productively complicating our landscape of sensibilities. The trajectory of this project seeks to establish and account for strategies of intervention and re-formation as activities of the social site of craft. To focus further, I will position woodworking as a specific example of craft activity in establishing a capacity for contending with our civic landscape. Woodwork, or more precisely the discourse framing it, offers many strategic

openings for critique. It offers an account of an as yet still existing labor power despite displacement through the perpetuated logic of the “necessity” of consumerism. Its history establishes productive energies of skill and materiality, not as a definitive fact, but as a sophisticated enmeshment of antagonisms. The arduous career trajectory of the woodworker (whether professional or amateur), for example, serves as a producer of a subjectivity, i.e. social identity (and the possibility of hidden identities) for that worker. Similarly, the consumer of the spectacular object of this arduous production is not only a consumer of the durable good, but a consumer of the status possibilities of such objects as stage craft. Further, they are consumers of not only the object presence of the commodity, but the productive energy, in its symbolic capacity, of another human (there is more present than a turn of phrase, for instance, when a person affects the terms *my cabinetmaker*, *my carpenter*, *my furniture maker* etc.). Thus the skill set *woodwork* is a producer of subjectivity, the object *woodwork* in its consumption is another producer of subjectivity, and the directional force of the productive activity is another producer of subjectivity---all layered with status assumptions and subtle exploitations.

From the vantage of institutional reproduction, *woodwork* offers form for the transmission of *taste*, and in a particularly intimate package. Our modern conception of *taste* has been tied historically to an aesthetic (read Kant) imagining of transcendental reality. The short hand of this narrative establishes the idea that some people have the ability to recognize and cultivate it, while others do not. A host of explanations have arisen for this phenomenon from a



variety of important figures. The thrust of these varied arguments, whether for some intransitive quality of beauty or by some universal biological condition, has the effect of entrenching certain status relations. It further acts as a thought stopping device. It inhibits re-imagining the conditions of equality in epistemological structures, and therefore relations of people. Alternatively, we can model this process through the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose investigation into the activities of acquisition and celebration of articles of cultural significance (objects of taste) allow access to the relations of people in their management of equality---a sense of taste as dispensed---primarily through familial and formal educational vehicles. (13) This is to say that *taste* is mostly a matter of ascription and has within its logic the establishment and maintenance of social hierarchy. Modes of production, both in terms of material manipulation and informational systems, play a crucial role in the dispensation of taste.

These processes of dispensation are multiple and interwoven. We can see in Louis Althusser's account of hegemonic power and reproduction through State power a narrative of the dispensation of sensibilities based in the interpenetration of repressive and ideological action. Althusser takes as his starting point the necessity for any productive process to reproduce the means of their production. (128) By saying productive process, he means material production including not only goods and services but the status relations of people. And in any relations of productive processes there will be winners and losers. Thus the term hegemony indicates the class faction whose interests are reproduced through the dispensation of the reproduction of productive processes. As Althusser states,

“...in a class society the relations of production are relations of exploitation, and therefore relations between antagonistic classes.” (175) We can see then why the reproduction of these conditions rely primarily on ideology. It has always been difficult to manage the relations of subjects through coercion, however effective. An interpellative process therefore allows this management as if on the subject’s own terms. The varied systems of social relations act as dispensers of not only the skills that a subject needs to perform in their productive role, but also the conventional knowledge that reproduces the subject in that role. As Althusser states it:

Each mass ejected *en route* is practically provided with the ideology that suits the role it has to fulfill in class society... (155)

The reproduction of labour power thus reveals as its *sine qua non* not only the reproduction of its ‘skills’ but also the reproduction of its subjection to the ruling ideology or of the ‘practice’ of that ideology, with the proviso that it is *in the forms and under the forms of ideological subjection* that provision is made for the reproduction of the skills of labour-power. (133)

The foci of these processes are what Althusser terms Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA’s). These are varied and often contradictory social institutions that most often occur in the private domain. They act to interpellate the population as subjects through the ideological dispensation of conventional wisdom. For example, Althusser finds the school/family couple as the dominant

ISA site (157) and Pierre Bourdieu concurs: "... [Educational capital] guarantees cultural capital more or less completely..." (13) To be clear, however, the reproduction of State power is a complex and mediated function. The term State is indicative of the hegemony of sensibilities that are dispensed and the class relation(s) that are privileged. It has little to do with the personalities in power, as seen in how these apparatuses frequently live on long after the regime in control has been supplanted. Further, this lingering affect of apparatuses complicates the narrative of conventional wisdom. It is not hard to find, for example, holdover messages supporting the mode of patronage even within our liberal democratic society apparatuses. These apparatuses are also contested sites, where the effects of class struggle often play out. As effective as ISA's are, they are also loose, complex and unpredictable. The ideological action is also not so centralized and conspiratorial, as Pierre Bourdieu comments:

"It is the law of the homologies, not cynical calculation, which causes work to be adjusted to the expectations of their audience."  
(Bourdieu 239)

"Taste is the form *par excellence* of *amor fati*. The habitus generates representations and practices which are always more adjusted than they seem to be to the objective conditions of which they are the product." (Bourdieu 244)

To look at a few examples of ideological reproduction in action, we can start with Howard Zinn's narrative in his *People's History of the United States*. As

stated earlier in this report, Zinn notes that university education in the U.S. was expanded and made accessible to a population of would be middle class through the wealth and energy of the so called “robber barons”, among them Leland Stanford, Andrew Carnegie, Cornelius Vanderbilt and Ezra Cornell. (263) Zinn finds here an attempt to create, out of nothing, a professional class to buffer the rich against antagonism---a proxy and alibi for the investor’s exploitation. (263) In relation to Althusser’s and Bourdieu’s account of the special ideological impact of the educational system, we can view this as an especially effective enactment of ideological apparatus. Alternately, we can look to visual cues as example of this interpellative mode. It is no mistake, for instance that Germany’s National Democratic Party (Nazi Party) of the thirties used neo-classicism to give its argument visual validity. The re-imagining of classical Greek form gave the Nazi regime a historically powerful platform for the universalizing of ideals as if they were free from cultural constraints (the justification of racial superiority in opposition to the idea of “ethnic”, i.e. non-white). Likewise, it’s an easy fit for early U.S. modernists to make their case in abstract expressionism. Here, conceptualizations of the mediumatic power of individual “genius” and the purified essence of natural processes gave visual form to the hyper-individuating climate of 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S.-style capitalism. Thus ISA’s are not institutional objects, but activities of governance and mediation. They are ways to kernelize (i.e. a process of ideological compression) hegemonic desire in a way that is readable by its constituency, yet replaces the reality of its mediation with the feel of internal justification. Our contemporary world evidences profound innovations

in ideological production moving hand in hand with our innovations in information technology. We are a connected consumerist society, and as designers for years have acknowledged, increasingly sensitive to the emotional and experiential qualities of our environment. As author and designer Jonathan Chapman states, in his book *Emotionally Durable Design: Objects, Experiences and Empathy*:

Material consumption is driven by complex motivations and is about far more than the acquisition of newer, shinier things. It is an endless personal journey toward the ideal or desired self that by its very nature becomes a process of incremental destruction; this take up and subsequent displacement of matter enables the consumer to perceive their individual evolution and development as it occurs ontologically...(30)

We have an inundation of signs flooding our awareness and are more capable than ever of acquiring them because of our sophisticated production systems, delivery systems and our new modes of conceptualization (innovations in legal/administrative modes). We have, however, become less capable of acknowledging the political and economic referents to the knowledge we carry. We are aware of our insatiable and increasing desire for material culture as durable experience, but increasingly in its most felt forms. In the end we are less consumers of information than ideology.

We can see in Althusser's analysis a historical model of the interpenetration of hegemonic interest into the social workings of a population. A useful extension of this is the analyses put forward by Peter Miller and Nikolas

Rose in their article “Governing Economic Life”, itself an extension of Michel Foucault’s sociology of governance. This account shifts the activity of governance from the discrete bodies of state and population in relation to the idea of interwoven and competitive sensibilities activated in a heterogeneous population with individual power. (Miller and Rose 10) This represents what Foucault called “government at a distance” as the character of liberal democracy. This is not an imagining of the bodies of government and population as more separate and discrete. If anything this is a signal of the dis-corporation of government as the site of politics. It is instead recognition of the gap in liberal democracies between the force and focus of governance, i.e. the programs of intervention and the social site they are aimed at. (Miller and Rose 9) Foucault points to the focus of governance in contemporary times as the creation and administration of rationales of governance and alliances of relationships in bridging this gap. (Miller and Rose 10) Miller and Rose proffer the term “action at a distance”; a mode analogous to colonial governance, which both further disembodies the object of government and allows its analysis as an activity rather than an object. (10) The force of this is the technical aspect of programmatic administration; its ability to inscribe modes of administration (writing, listing, numbering, and computing) and its capacity to establish and activate modes of evaluation and intervention. (Miller and Rose 8) This is not *merely* administrative but *transformatively* administrative. The management of language in what Miller and Rose call “technologies of information” is the process of inscription that makes a social field not only administrable, but politically

knowable. (4) It is innovations in this field, hand in hand with what Ina Blom refers to as the *televisual* (more on later), which has opened for debate not just the activation of civic space but also the structure of that space. The character of our 21<sup>st</sup> century civic space is thus a horizontal profligation of competing information. (Miller and Rose 11) The determining factors in moving toward efficacy then, are our ability to contend with, manipulate, re-source, and invent technologies of information.

## Woodwork as Relational Space

The force of this project is to locate productive possibilities for craft within our contemporary context, which specifically means in the site of our relationships of sensibilities. The directness and specificity with which craft is imagined, namely its practical formation as an encounter with material, physical space and modes of production could seem an impediment to this re-positioning. It may also seem that a political and economic re-formation of craft must arise in opposition to craft's sensual character. These assumptions are voiced in anticipation of much of the critical discourse surrounding what has been called *neo-conceptualism*, and how that critique has inhibited the site of structural re-imagination. This is namely the charge that conceptualism of the seventies was an occurrence of anti-aestheticism and that contemporary art-work of relational character is a re-capitulation of it. (Blom 34) I disagree with this account and use critic Ina Blom's narrative in her book *On the Style Site: Art, Sociality and Media Culture* as a productive way to imagine the relationship of sensual form and conceptual intervention. Here she uses the term "style", and proposes a re-imagining of it, in order to grab onto it not as a component of visual form but as a site of subjectivity and social relations. Style here is the sensuous feel of our interaction with specific spaces and times. It is the site where potentials of self



are activated, and not as some platonic ideal but as manifestations of identity in a material state of becoming. This is not counter to the inscriptive activity of the creation and maintenance of sensibilities, but is joined to it. Heightened subjectivity as political manifestation is the state of Foucault's governance from afar. Our contemporary economy, where surplus value is garnered from sensuous attention time enables it. The point is not a refutation of aesthetics, but recognition of the regressive and impractical character of aesthetics as modernism enacts it. This reimagining of woodwork is not hampered by its production processes and its physical presence. This is in fact the site of the possibilities of re-imagination. This must take a (social) form for it to be enacted which includes a feel for the site of engagement.

The activity of intervention then, premised in the re-imagining of woodwork is not a process of description but of possibilities of form and subjectivity in its socialities. And within the activity of production process as a form of reproduction, there are many ways to activate it more ethically. Artisanal practice can, for example, take back through production and dissemination activities which strengthen the position of the artisan as a whole person---and in terms of how that necessarily means a relation of community. Woodwork can give readable form for processes of civic accountability in production, including environmental responsibility, social equity and civic efficacy. The artisan can make sophisticated decisions about the sourcing of material based on concomitant pollution, the mitigation of ethnic exploitation and the reinforcement of regional identities. Much of this is symbolic intervention. What this means is

that artisanal production, due to the small scale of it, may have very little effect on the conditions of production, such as the real depletion of natural resources or the creation of market demand for more sustainable resources. It does, however, have great effect on the dispensation of relations to the conditions of economy. Through enactment of participatable form, we can model new sensibilities as sites of discourse. We have at our disposal an economic climate that privileges experiential engagement, which has at least the potential to enable personal empowerment for the critical participant. Further, we have a highly sophisticated inventory of legal modes of inscription, intervention and administration, as well as tools to re-purpose and re-imagine them. The key to our effectiveness, then, is how we manage these resources.

Artistic modes of institutional critique have shifted in recent years toward a focus on collaborative methods and enactments of co-presence. One could call this a propensity toward the social, and while the activity isn't new, the ubiquity of these activities is (Blom 126). Within this mode there arises an antagonism between mainly two ways of activation: what Blom calls the transparent/pragmatic and the opaque/reflexive. (129) These are not poles, but tendencies that are often interrelated. In the privileging of one style over the other, however, we can see different imaginings of a social experience. Grant Kester is credited with championing the tendency toward transparent activities of social aesthetics (dialogical aesthetics). (Blom 128) Here Blom positions the activity as a strategic imagining of art as a way to intervene on the social economic antagonisms of politically codified social bodies. (126) These are

actionist activities reckoning with site specificity as the political antagonisms of the participants. Often dialogical work is criticized, especially by those with a stake in the high cultural capital of fine art, as denigrating the frames of art. Dialogical art does not bring the field of art into its work as a necessary precondition. Instead it utilizes the tools of art strategically, including its methods of giving readable form to experiences and especially in transposing the symbolic, economic and cultural capital garnered through art onto the subject(s) of intervention. (Blom 126) One heavy critique of this activity which threatens to undermine its goals, charges that dialogical art essentializes the social site and ideas of community. In operating on distinct corporate bodies of community, it concretizes the fact of community and locates it monolithically. This negates the dynamic aspect of community *as an act of becoming*: i.e. as a body of contingency and ambivalence. In short it locates the *object* and not the *activity* of community. (Blom 129) Further, this focus on the social site is in line with the modernist principle of the site specific. While generally this means the place of the erection of a monument or display of art, the focus on discrete community bodies may have the effect of re-capitulating modernist ideological compression. It has been charged with objectifying the social relations of communities, and thus de-limiting opportunities for new, hidden and unplanned sociality. (Blom 130) In Ina Blom's words, "To take a principled interest in the issues of the site is ... to take an interest in the framing devices or parergonal structures through which modern art's relation to its own 'inside' and 'outside' is negotiated." (130)

The opaque/reflexive mode, however, has had more aggressive critique levied against it. Exemplified by the works of Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija, these activities of social exchange seem to take form as an abstract spirit of conviviality---the habits of lounging, hanging out and sharing food. (Blom 126) The critique against this mode charges that it harmonizes antagonistic political space and is thus a mollifier (or even nullifier) of social reckoning. (Blom 134) Rather than utilizing the art discipline as strategy, these works are integrated into the possibilities of it. They qualify no community directly (although in their opacity, certainly the industry experts are privileged) in imagining a rather neutral social site. I suggest that the opacity of these imaginings is comparable to the rupture strategy of the avant-garde. Further, in denying access to the participants in terms of the design of the experience and its logic of significance (through its opacity), this activity can be viewed as a conflation of the figure of the artist and the artist's intent. As mentioned earlier, this is re-formation of the primacy of the individual, and in our current economy of attention value, has heightened currency as well as having heightened exploitative potential. Ina Blom seeks to champion this work, however, and sees in it the potential to allow new forms of subjectivity through the interplay of style and the desire for transformative experiences in the participants. She positions the potential for the creation of new subjectivities, i.e. the production/appropriation of new and discursive identities as the prime act of civic empowerment. The flexible format of these activities is an enactment of the assemblage---which is to Blom the art specific production of sociality. (125) Critical to her account is the ability to affect

the ambience of the space, a phenomenon that she describes as neither an object nor an activity, but something between the two. It is akin to, “an object like emotion that is cast into a shared space.” (66) Further her account hinges on the mode of being represented by the televisual. This is the sense of multi layers of time cognition, or real time-ness in cognition of multiple *heres*. In Ina Blom’s words:

... modern electrified homes represent a new type of media that occupies itself with information processing and hence provides human perception with an organic flexibility unknown to any other age. (60)

... the medium of television and the various media of utopian imagination can be described as time machines, in that they administer complex temporalities where the future or the past continually impinges on the present. (138)

...live transmissions do not simply overcome distance but seem to somehow short-circuit the notion of distance itself. It renders distance invisible by transposing it directly into the live vision it transmits. (68)

Thus Blom recognizes new technological modes as new epistemological realities. This is both a producer of new opportunities for the re-imagination of identity and new spaces for sociality. (Blom 86)

This section has found potential for regressive enactment present in current practices of craft. It has also located political space that the craft

discipline has a direct stake in and may be productive in intervening through. It has explored models of inscription that create and manage sensible production. And the position of pragmatic (transparent) and discursive (opaque) social activation through the discipline of art (craft) has been identified. In this way this “report” has opened up the possibilities of social engagement for craft through observation, example and discussion. This is a starting point of the encounter with craft in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the next section I will examine two important enactments of woodwork from the point of view of their material object-ness and their potential for civic engagement.

## Examples of Interventions in Action

In order to better understand the activity of craft and its potential for critical intervention, this section offers analysis of the woodwork of David Pye and furniture design by Roy McMakin. These individuals are separately important figures within the field of craft in the USA and elsewhere. The late David Pye stands as a seminal figure in the studio craft movement, and especially within the domain woodwork coming out of the 1970's. McMakin is a contemporary figure who embodies the direction of studio woodwork in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They each offer popular and distinct modes of enactment, and in terms of this project, stand in for dominant modes of craft production. These have in common the intention and effect of interventional activity in dominant sensibilities. They are focused on the presentation of real world objects, which is to say that the language of their visual argument focuses on our habits of the domestic, the banal or the mundane. Further, interventions in sociality form the structure of Pye's and McMakin's case for significance, and not as a tertiary affect. This seeks to describe methods of intervention in concrete terms, as well as the dysfunctions and negative functions of the activities. These moments are strategic and perhaps analogous to a wake from a boat---without conspiratorial direction but directly related to the direction and force of travel and under acknowledged in its environmental affect. Further, there are alternately tendencies toward both transparent and opaque methods of social activation, complicated by heavy

doses of modernist habits of the author and object. This situation of competitive interpellation and subjectivization results in a proliferation of unplanned responses. This is certainly the case for the activities of Pye and McMakin.

### The Woodwork of David Pye

The late David Pye is most popularly known in the United States as the author of two books *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, 1968, and *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design*, 1978. He was also a professor of furniture design at The Royal College of Art in London, England; a designer for industry and a craftsman. He retired from teaching in 1974 and extensively exhibited his work throughout the United Kingdom. He was awarded the prestigious OBE (Order of the British Empire) in 1985. His writing holds particular attention for participants of the studio furniture movement, which emerged on the scene in the US post World War II and gained conspicuous presence in the sixties and seventies.

In getting a sense of the woodwork of David Pye, we must account for the context of their display, whether that be the kitchen table (these were often small objects of domestic function), The Victoria and Albert Museum (which has his work in their permanent collection), or for his particular US audience, as illustration within his texts. This last context is of particular interest for this analysis, because these illustrations were the primary (and practically only)



vehicle for the display/dissemination of Pye's work to his US craft audience. Further, the work's conjointment with Pye's writing offers textual insight that the museum merely attempts to embody, and thus the possibility of a more thorough relationship to their acquisition as significant objects and the force of their thematic trajectory. Pye worked in solid wood in vessel forms and small sculpture utilizing carving and turning techniques. In proximity to his writing, they give form to his declaration for the need in our industrial consumer landscape for humane diversity. (Pye, *The Nature and Art ... 128*) He is not romantic in an Arts and Crafts sense of the term, but he does find concern for the contaminating effects of the homogeneity of the urban designed landscape. In Pye's words, "... on the contrast and tension between regulation and diversity depends half the art of workmanship. But for our generation unrelieved regulation is bad, and may even be dangerous." (*The Nature and Art ... 64*) Pye is most often associated with his re-imagining of the term handmade. A particularly analytical thinker, Pye sought intervention in the romantic attitudes of craft. These old habits were, to him, counterproductive for the craftspeople that relied on them and a society overrun with the ubiquitous conformity of mass production. Pye's additions were the terms workmanship of risk versus that of certainty. The former refers to modes of production whereby the quality of the job is dependent on the judgment and skill of the worker. The latter is the mode of production where the result of the job is ascribed with certainty through the process---typically the leveraging of economic capital on the front end at the expense of skill. (Pye, *The Nature and Art 20*) If the term *hand-made* privileged the maker as the primary force of craft production, his

terms *workmanship of risk* and *workmanship of certainty* relocated this force in the material actions of production and their effects.

The relationship of his woodwork to his writing provides each other with significant internal justification. The display of his woodwork gives his argument more traction among his craft audience. It serves as credibility for a community that historically has privileged physical encounter in knowing the world. The woodwork, however, depends on the writing for its significance. Pye's social capital as an intellectual and technocrat, and his careful analytical writing serve to elevate the status of these objects. If they would have, through their own internal logic, allowed us to group them (benightedly) as handicraft---in proximity to the text they take on greater importance as symbols of intervention. Here the shaping of the form and the carved surfaces represent his view of diversity as the source of beauty and risk as the source of humane workmanship. (Pye, *The Nature and Art ...* 128)The object in context with the text offers a re-imagination of the feel of high quality, not as the clean unblemished surfaces and forms that industry provides with such economy and tremendous scale, but as the marks of the skilled craftsman engaged in highly regulated workmanship of risk. In this light, we attribute an indexical quality to the surfaces and forms of these objects. They are an effective re-imagination in that in the end we attribute internal necessity to the cultural logic of these objects, which in turn enables us to reproduce them ideologically. In Althusserian terms, this is a usurpation of the mode of reproduction through the ideological state apparatus. David Pye's view of the designer as special actor with special responsibilities in producing objects

of ethical effect here becomes evident. His wager is that the homogeneity of industry is atomizing, but we can offer solace with the application of the workmanship of risk and through it the production of objects of self-justifying variety. (Pye, *The Nature and Art ...* 128) Pye's insistence is that these objects are a direct product of skill in action---and thus more humane labor. In the end, according to Pye, these objects on their own terms will do their curative work. (*The Nature and Aesthetics ...* 104) One of his more effective strategies lies in the fact that his entreaty was not to the consumers of craft commodity, but to the producers (who are in turn consumers of craft ideology). This population thus produced the style objects and therefore reproduced the style---and I might add in a particularly persuasive package. I contend, however, that it is the writing that is acting as the supplement, and in true Derridean fashion erasing its own significance in the doing.

David Pye's intervention into the style site offers certain productive effects. His account offers a platform for the laborer to argue her/his significance. His analysis opens for renegotiation a civic understanding of work, which is to say who decides how a job gets done. He even makes an argument (if inadvertently) for the stake the community has in the employee/employer relationship, in his argument for the stake the community has in the product of production. He has also crucially opened up a conversation about the reproduction of values enmeshed in the reproduction of a style. His writing offers a thoughtful account of modes of production, their mediation through economy and concomitant feels to objects that reproduce themselves in their process entirety within the commodity

exchange game. His intervention, however, serves to establish the “object-with-variety” as an icon and in so doing risks dismissing the discursive productivity of his writing. Pye’s style was scientific and definition oriented. He operated through fierce analyses---a process of delineating discrete elements of a stratum and then organizing them for ideological effect. The critique of the transparent actionist activity fits Pye’s activity well. While he opened craft activity up to new possibilities through the dismantling of its romantic roots, the essentializing character of community and the role of the designer in providing ethical form for public consumption, which Pye’s work enabled, shuts down the possibilities of inter-subjectivities and further formal re-imaginings. Pye, in my view offers a somewhat productive example of humanist capitalism, with a somewhat ameliorated field of exploitative production.

### The Furniture of Roy McMakin

Taking the furnitureal work of artist/designer Roy McMakin into account offers a complex if unresolved version of taste and rupture. McMakin made his name in the early 1990’s through his Los Angeles showroom *Domestic Furniture* which showcased his own furniture work. The business lasted short of a decade, but he was able to build a market presence and develop an up-scale clientele and fine art gallery representation. (“Roy McMakin Biography”) As he works now, he acts as designer, investor and showman with artisanal and production

industry producing the work. His furniture works have the feel of serial production, perhaps borrowing from the look, as well as the production methods, of austerity furniture. This mode then is manipulated for idiosyncratic effect, whether that be through color, scale, proportion or user access. Thus the work is often attributed with the logic of studio production in its display. McMakin takes full credit for their production and the laborers are by and large unattributed, and it is left unclear to his gallery audience whether that should be based on his position as investor, labor or middle man. Thus he is implicitly given the authority of the studio “master” and because his work is furniture, is attributed the status of the designer/craftsman or artist/craftsman. This label operates effectively as it describes nostalgia reified in the person of McMakin, who interestingly also presents himself as both an arbiter of fashion and an inventor of style. The term also makes a case for the object importance of his work, implying the projection of his persona into the work. In contrast, these objects are simple and spare pieces of furniture and require less of artisanal skill and more by way of industrial capital to produce, despite their authorial acclaim. He is in a sense a neo-Brancusi, manipulating the feel of skill and tradition while negotiating his desires for the ideas of progress and novelty. These are examples of the force of McMakin’s persona as a producer of paradoxes and sensible dissensus. These conceits are overt, multiple and conflicting. Yet instead of dismissing McMakin’s work as a product of a pathological personality, we celebrate him. In the persona presented as McMakin, we can see parallels to what economists Miller and Rose deem the environment of the “expert” as the field of inscriptive governance. What

this means is that the figure of McMakin is covert and conflicted, but we come to grips with it because it is reflective of our political and economic reality. Our contemporary environment is one where fields of expertise increasingly incise jurisdictions of authority, and the justification for that authority is increasingly mystified. The ease with which we celebrate McMakin points to the ubiquity of the de-materialization of concrete objects and connections of logic in our contemporary situation.

Mathew Kangas, in his review in *Art in America*, described McMakin's furniture as having the look of, "...humble, unadorned, cheap motel furniture (that) is supplemented (to carry it into) more luxurious terrain." (163) McMakin uses simple, recognizable and static furniture forms as backdrop for his design manipulations---the tweaking of proportions, of expectations in function, associations we bring with color, juxtapositions through joining and grouping etc., in order to rupture our habits with this version of the *banal*. The outcome is a feel of awkwardness that carries a logic of clear intentionality and borders on the absurd. His strategy is thus the dissensus of the fine artist and it is this activity that moves these objects outside of the normal position of significance for either design or craft. They are not, and neither does McMakin appear to be attempting, beautiful objects or any analogous state. He instead seems to be actively promoting the uncertainty of the objects' internal logic of significance. This work in its generality produces an ambience. Discussed earlier in this thesis text, this is the phenomenon that critic Ina Blom refers to as an interstitial place between object and subject. In her words, "...they are always the result of subjective

perceptions, they are also object-like emotions that are cast into a shared space.”

(66) This is a fitting mode for the mercurial figure of McMakin, as the contradictory mode of ambience (atmosphere) is both (or neither) an individuating encounter with a truly external world and (nor) a space of sociality. The gallery display enhances this ambivalence, as we become uncertain of whether fine art attitudes are bleeding into commodity goods or objects of commodity are being appropriated for artistic ends. Michael Podmaniczky, in a review of a McMakin museum exhibition for the Furniture Society notes exactly this uncertainty in discussing the proper space of McMakin’s work: “The furniture benefits from a sympathetic interior, and even better, the deliberate context of a gallery installation like the new SDSU [San Diego State U] gallery, or better yet a trendy loft like the one in New York City where I saw a newer version of the table.” (95) The gallery itself acts as both autonomous space and boutique. Further, the encounter with this furniture engenders the feel of ownership, which in turn engenders new conceptions of identity. This work is stagecraft for our domestic lives. Inasmuch as the position of home has broadened dramatically as new formations of professional and social spaces, so has the formation of these subjectivities. It is informative to note here the layers of historic and contemporary yearning enmeshed in this furniture site. McMakin’s furniture speaks to the utopian attitude of the modern artist whose work anticipates a more perfected future. Further, it conjures the history of furniture as machinery for living, i.e. the designers desire to manipulate sociality through designed commodity. In McMakin’s enactment, though, we access utopia only as an

approximation. McMakin uses awkwardness not simply as a strategy, but a point of departure. He has left behind the craftsperson's vision of timeless beauty and has instead embraced ambivalence and the interstitial as the site of sociality.



## Report of Praxis.

As a component of this thesis project, and as partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Fine Arts degree, I produced five objects of woodwork over the span of approximately one year. I exhibited these as a group member at the annual graduate student thesis exhibition. The exhibition took place in the Wellington B. Gray Gallery within the Jenkins Fine Art building at East Carolina University from April 15<sup>th</sup> through May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011. In relation to the thesis project as a whole, the exhibition represented praxis for the critical work of craft re-form. To be clear, I view this as just one formal imagining extending from the trajectories of critical interventions preceding in the text. Within this thesis paper, I will therefore offer an account of the mode of production including design thinking, and an account of the activity of exhibition. I believe a linear relationship from the creative activity of research and analysis to the formal embodiment of interventional practice would have been the most practical way to progress. This project however took shape as a concurrent practice of production and exhibition alongside the writing and research. This was a pragmatic approach, and a response to the time and norm constraints instituted through the typical MFA attainment process. Needless to say, I found great disadvantage to it. That said, the force of the whole of this thesis project is in engaging models of discursivity, and a formal imagining should be viewed as no more than a wager. The frame of this praxis report, represented here in the text, is discussion and critique of these

modes of activity in relational terms---including strengths, weaknesses and the identification of areas of further interest.

The activities of production and display of the exhibition objects are framed by their relationship to the institutional practice of the Master of Fine Art degree. Enacted here through East Carolina University, this sets the stage for the expression of various particular attitudes. The School of Art and Design (SOAD) at ECU recognizes the MFA degree as the terminal degree in studio art. (*ECU ... Proposed Graduate Manual 44*) Further, the SOAD recognizes objects of production within discrete concentrations of studio practice as the thesis work. (*ECU ... Proposed Graduate Manual 45*) These objects are considered the thesis and the written component is considered a 'report' and is support material for the thesis work. (*ECU ... Proposed Graduate Manual 45*) The MFA thesis process, as identified at ECU, thus explicitly privileges art production as object making and diminishes the value of textual research and analysis. And the value of articulating the ECU requirements for the MFA degree is in identifying the modern ideological politics framing enactment of the MFA exhibition. The MFA process can of course be re-negotiated. These inscribed attitudes are framing elements, but the process occurs through the relations of individuals, specifically the MFA committee along with the student. The place of the exhibition, however, is primed for the display and acquisition of activities understood as concrete objects with durable and internal significance.

The Wellington B. Gray Gallery describes its own function as “an integral part of the School of Art and Design’s educational mission.” (“Welcome” n. pag.) This statement, however vague, positions this exhibition as educational space for the students in the school, the ECU community and a broader regional community. While it is not at all certain who among the students, staff, faculty and community access the museum and how, a national demographic gives a glimpse. Accordingly, museum goers are probably 65% over fifty years old, 82% without children, 86% holders of college degrees and 92% white. (“Who’s Coming to Your Museum? ...”) While I do not present this as a declarative statement about the identities of Gray Gallery attendees, it certainly suggests a small and relatively homogeneous group.

The interior of the Gray Gallery is a traditionally white walled, parquet floored gallery space with an administrative foyer up front and offices and storage in the back. The main display area is some 3,000 square feet of floor space which was unevenly distributed between ten student artists. The other exhibiting artists claimed the disciplines of painting, sculpture, metal design, textile design and ceramics. All of them used pedestals, lighting and formally accepted compositions for display of their work. Notably, two exhibiting artists used recognizably furnitureal objects as display mechanisms, assumedly to create domestic context within the gallery space. Outside of a few moments of dissensus, it is safe to say the function of the gallery frame in this exhibition was as autonomous space to elevate the significance of the art objects while simultaneously effacing its own contribution.

The position of this project runs counter to many of the attitudes that the character of the institutionally prescribed activity and space of the MFA exhibition engender. This project positions object significance as an activity of social relations, and finds usefulness for the exhibition process only so far as it surfaces those relationships and offers potential for ethical (re)imaginings. A more complete discussion of the pressure and management of these antagonisms will be discussed in the account of the social site of the exhibition to follow.

## Enactment

Framing a discussion of enactment has the potential to position different contexts for negotiation. Despite the inscribed dismissal of a textual account as *merely* a report, I believe enquiry offers multiple transformative modes of imagining intervention. This discussion centers on two, which I will frame as the artisanal and the social site, as ways to imagine the affect and effectiveness of these formal activities. The artisanal mode seeks to understand the embodied energy in producing the thesis craftwork. In this way I will discuss the activities of design and labor from a civic-minded perspective on an object by object basis. The mode of the social site seeks to contend with the activity of display and their affect from a relational perspective. This mode seeks to account for the overall affect and effectiveness of the exhibited craftwork in its site(s) of cultural activation.

## An Artisanal Account

My woodworking career was framed by schools that I would characterize as being informed by the art/craft traditions of humanized skill (an objectified production process) and romantic sensibilities of the material (wood) being manipulated. I began woodworking at the Appalachian Center for Craft at Tennessee Tech University in Smithville, Tennessee. This program, while constraining itself to modes of craft production, stressed the importance of versatility in using woodworking as an expressive media. I then attended the College of the Redwoods fine furniture making program in Fort Bragg, California. This school was founded through the collective efforts of community woodworkers, and was critically driven by the textual work of its most notable instructor, James Krenov, and his experience as a student in designer Carl Malmsten's woodworking school in Sweden. Emphasis at the College of the Redwoods was placed on certain specific processes of woodworking and the manipulation of the material as an activity of self-expression. The work that I have done within the MFA program at East Carolina University significantly differs from that which is promoted at these places---and much of it in this thesis project runs counter. I do, however, have a career history of woodwork, starting from these encounters and spanning in various forms for thirteen years. I think an important part of the force of this thesis project is formed in the recognition and

expression of the embodied energy of workmanship and design, i.e. cumulative engagement and its costs and benefits underlying the expression of production. I do not intend with this statement to privilege woodworking or material manipulation. I also do not wish to imply a romanticizing of tradition or material or the conflation of the value of self, as in an internal justification of self-actualization or expression. I do want to position the importance of critical engagement over time as a site of identity and sociality, and the daily, small-scale decisions involved within this engagement as a potentially civically expressive site. There are many ways to grab onto the question of artisanal production and career identity. The field of sociology offers extensive literature to gain traction for analysis in the form of, for example, contending with leisure and professionalism in terms of self and group identity. So does economics in especially the form of a political economy frame for relationships to production, consumption and ideological reproduction. Suffice it to say, it is beyond the scope of this project to contend with this landscape fully. I will, however, foreground moments of this project in artisanal terms in order to locate this mode as an important point of entry and for future analysis. The following then is an object by object account of these possibilities.

Weaving Bench (On and off Table)

Sycamore, yellow canary wood, ash

Shellac polish finish

This piece of furniture was built specifically for my wife, Amanda. She is an artist who uses loom weaving as a mode of production. Her requirements were critical to the design and production of this object. We chose the primary woods together, with an understanding that it will be finished with shellac polish. Its seat height was prescribed by the treadle height of the loom and her leg length and desired weaving position. The seat was to be kept flat and smooth to allow her to slide back and forth. Finally, she desired seated access to tool storage from the sides. Normally, weaving benches would include a hinged lid that you would access from the top, or storage in the form of wooden 'pockets' on the side. My solution of drawers on the side allows easy access to materials while seated and more space and organizational potential than traditional pockets. As a detractor, it also decreased the amount of useable space, compared to a hinged lid bench, because of the thicknesses of the drawers in the drawer boxes and greatly increased the difficulty of the project.

Building this was a long and difficult process. The joinery was exacting in places because of its load requirement and the drawer design, which required space where the pressures from seated use were most extreme. The shaping of the legs was particularly difficult as the look I chose utilized tapering and twisting lateral planes. I shaped these with the band saw and hand tools. My desire to faithfully reproduce these four legs led to a rigorous order of execution and the use of multiple templates. Many of the solutions to the particular production problems this piece posed were solved when I came to them in the process. While much of the design work was done upfront, inscriptively through

requirements list and descriptively through mock-ups, much of the design still took shape as I contended with production.

My vantage point through this process could best be described as ambivalent. This was built at the very start of this thesis project. At this point I was contending with rather inchoate ideas of craftwork in civic terms but I was at a loss as to how to embody them and then how to relate that embodiment to my history of woodworking production that in many ways runs counter to these ideas. My production solution was to intellectually compartmentalize these frames, and so I designed and built this object as if my intentions were clear (beauty in form and function as informed through past educational experiences) and used the tension of my ambivalent engagement to shape the deconstructive and re-formative narrative of the thesis project. This ambivalence shows up in its display in the MFA exhibition, first as the lone object displayed on a pedestal and then the replacement of that pedestal with a table. More on the surfacing of these ambivalences will be discussed in the account of the exhibition as a social site.

#### Little Branch Table

Ash, white oak, walnut, paint (brushed, screen printed (derivative pattern of a William Morris wallpaper design))

Oil finish.



This table is simply constructed out of solid wood using slip tenon joinery and bread board ends for the top. It is based in form and technique on a class project that I was tasked with early in school, and that I in turn was teaching in a survey section of the wood design concentration in the School of Art and Design at ECU.

The design method was an evolving process of the relationships of iconography centered on the various meanings of the term “workman-like”. This term anticipates a critique of skill in terms of degree. It establishes a moral ground between the extremes of obsessive workmanship (as a fetish) and poor workmanship. This idea is a proxy for naturalized modes of production. Here, the idea of quality is reproduced as if self-evident and not a function of competing political and economic pressures. There are many historical examples of the idea of the workmanlike in action, and these continue to have resounding and often negative effects on relationships of worker to work and consumer to commodity. The historical fact of its multiple re-imaginings should give cause for a deconstructive and contingent understanding. The idea of ‘workman-like’ or its aliases, however, remain a durably opaque sensibility. The Shaker furniture tradition and the English Arts and Crafts tradition are different examples of the reification of this activity, and each continues to affect our landscape of sensibilities. For instance, we can see these politics reproduced in more contemporary practices like functionalist design. The force of the design of this table then is in interventional terms with these naturalized and moralized modes of production that I am terming here ‘workman-like’. As a strategy for critique, I

chose to inhabit the mode of workman-like in the production of this table, while utilizing readable symbol to short circuit this logic of enactment. Here “workman-like” took form as the “feel” of the surface quality, the style of shaping in the legs, the grain selection in the layout of materials and the relative overall simplicity of the process. I sought cognitive rupture in the deliberate misappropriation of the feel of these activities. For example, I cut holes in the top of the table as direct reference to the dog-holes in a traditional cabinet-makers bench. Further, I through tenoned small square staves from the bottom and left their wedged end grain protruding slightly from the top. In the functionalist thinking of Arts and Crafts makers, structural directness was attributed a quality of integrity and complexity and decoration were attributed qualities of deceit. These style components of the table then are examples of structural modes used for useless, i.e. decorative, ends; thus ruptural devises in functionalist thinking. The branch underneath is from a dogwood tree, located just steps outside of the SOAD building (the place of production). The branch represents the presence of the idea of ‘natural’ in relation to the approximation of ‘natural’ in the feel of workmanlike design and production. To complicate the relationship, this branch is itself an approximation of the desire to locate a terrain of natural morality. This plays out in its decorative function underneath the table where it is tenoned in place. This was especially apparent in the significance of the slow withering of its buds and leaves as a product not of the natural processes of death but as an effect of the appropriation and dispensation of cultural significance.

## Ash and Soil Bench

Ash, top soil (bagged on softwood pallet), blue grass.

Oil varnish finish on ash slab.

This object was built quickly, and as something of a break in the middle of the longer and more arduous chair construction project. The object of this project was to use metaphor as a ruptural device. Like the table that precedes it, I forced disparate ideas into proximity---literally structural components of the functional bench. This started with a waney ash slab and the idea of a bench form. This brings to mind obvious reference to the work of George Nakashima and a mode of thinking characterized by the encounter with authenticity. This is contrasted and re-formed by the commodification processes that form the structural significance of natural resources. Thus palletization stands as proxy for the taxonomy of commodities that define the structure of our sensibilities surrounding nature. Grass is included in this composition like the branch in the preceding table. This is as ostensibly the presence of what nature can do on its own terms. Functionally, however, this decorative commodity plays out as an endlessly complicated and mediated experience of projected desires.

## Wood Framed Chairs with Ply Seat

Ash, poplar, cork.

Lacquer finish.

Throughout history, chairs have arguably been the most difficult furniture object to design and produce within the field of furniture-making. Their design requirements are complex and competing. In addition the room for error, because of the intimacy of our functional contact with them, is exceedingly small. Because of this, I argue that chairs as design solutions are inevitably approximations. This leaves plenty of room for exploration, and in terms of my woodworking 'career' I will confess that tackling this challenge held seductive significance. We can understand this motive as the desire to enact rigor within the craft production component of my thesis project. This kind of thinking could be understood in many ways. It could be perceived, for instance, as the embodying activity of a form of authoritarianism. I would not be engaged with the material in production, but a field of others as I attempt to distinguish myself through rare expertise. We have long historical associations with this mode, from artisanal guild classification right up through today in our expanding fields of expert authority. To be succinct, I view this as a desire for individuation and proxy for a worldview that values ownership and delimits potential for community enactment. Expertise could also be viewed as a way to engage with an activity in a career trajectory. This account brings out the productive effects of the successes and varied failures that come with the challenge. Expertise is a potential site for building durable and effective identity (subjectivity as the potential field of civic efficacy) as well as community through a field of shared experience. The undertaking of this project does not adopt the latter view and dismiss the former. I believe the activity of expertise is

one of conflicting values, and I feel both rewarded and troubled by my experiences. One example of regressive reproduction this engagement has enacted is the great financial cost of this experience and the habits that this produces. Building these chairs took months to accomplish and the costs in design, tooling and materials were upwards of \$1,000. Importantly, I was able to work on this as if it were my profession. During this time I worked as a part-time instructor as part of a graduate assistantship program, and received approximately \$15,000 in loans to support myself (and my family). I am acutely aware of how fortunate I am to have been able to leverage my energies as if my own economic requirements were not at issue. I am anxious of the coming decades of debt that I worry will weigh me and my family down. I am also broadly concerned with what this means for our distribution of expertise, especially considering what a profound shaper of social efficacy expertise has become. As for the question 'Who has the opportunity to develop expertise?' The answer in my experience is that it is dependent not on sacrifice or even talent, but on one's capacity to leverage money for time. In this light, it is not at all surprising that chair-making is a rarefied skill-set. It requires a great amount of energy to develop competence. Further, our productive climate of outsourced and proletarianized labor, industrial scale economy and externalized production costs provide spectacular commodities at very low price points. So embodying years of skill building and vast hours of skilled production in a commodity object has little room for traction in today's economy. There is just very little return to be had on such a steep financial investment.

The production of these chairs offered great room for success and failure. Many of the techniques I used I have never performed before. For some of them, I could not even find resources to help imagine the process. Forming compound curves in the seat and back, for example, was a relatively blind process. This shape is performed in industry, especially in monocoque airplane and boat building, but tends to be a product of extreme tooling. Design, particularly here but also throughout the project, became an evolving and complex negotiation between design requirements and production limitations. The hardwood chair 'frame' (legs and stretchers) is derived from the Scandinavian modern idiom, and particularly aspects of Hans Wegner's and Finn Juhl's design work. This style has been criticized by historians as being a conciliation of the ideals of the arts and crafts movement with the values of industrialism. I prefer to think of Scandinavian modern in terms of an attempt to imagine artisanal activity as a contemporary practice. Some of these designs were considered industrial failures in that their production couldn't easily be jigged and therefore required too much in the way of skilled labor (for industrial standards). In appropriating a Scandinavian mode for the 'frame', I seek to enact possibilities of artisanal practice as a primary mode of production. The seat and the back contrast the frame just as international modernism contrasted with Scandinavian modernism. The compound bends of these panels, and the modern material and methods evoke the work of Ray and Charles Eames or Eliel Saarinen. I argue that their explorations into modern materials and methods are a celebration of what industrial practices can provide on their own terms. The seat and back platform

relate to the frame antagonistically in terms of their historical and production logic. This chair design combines productive modes that foreground both artisanal labor and industrial production as alternately poor approximations of what the other can easily perform. I do not believe it is at all certain in the juxtaposition of these structures (i.e. the internal logic of the constituent parts of the furniture object) how these relate qualitatively. This can be perceived as a creative failure in design. It is evident, however, that the relationship is contested, which is illustrative at least of our contemporary landscape of production.

#### A Social Site Account

The preceding artisanal frame seeks to account for the constituent modes of production and labor power involved in the construction and design of the object component of this thesis project. We should note however that descriptive form such as this currently holds a functional position within the culture industry, and that the values constituting its reproductive power in many ways runs counter to a political economic exchange. Description, whether as a report or artist statement, tends to be understood in terms of personal expression. This diary approach seeks to both elevate the prominence of the individual and dismiss the social connections that locate that individual in context. The privileging of design intent is akin to other modernist strategies, like for example the supplanting of style over subject or the elevation of the artist as medium

(clairvoyant). Historically these strategies took direction and gave force to innovations in political economies. As the internal authority of the aristocracy was displaced by new modes of capitalist intervention, new forms of productive activity gave rise to a justifying logic for the self-generating right to authority and specifically the right for the investor to lay claim to profit. In comparing these chronologically disparate modes, I not only indicate equivalence but an exacerbation in our 21<sup>st</sup> century space. To return to Ina Blom's analyses, our current technological and global economic environment is a site of hyper-individuation and dis-corporation of the production of surplus-value. (38) Today's climate is far more abstract, and thus a more individuating environment than ever. Thus these strategies are more present and re-productive.

Within the assumptions we bring to the privileging of the designer's intent is a trust in the determinant possibilities of methodology---a mode concurrent with our new and far reaching modes of legalistic inscriptive, not to mention our shared positivist and scientific conventional world-views . In our present age, fields of design have greatly expanded and have notably and increasingly focused on experience as the site of intervention. Again Blom gives insight into the dysfunction of this activity. Noting that determinating method relies on and thus promotes social bodies as distinct political entities, i.e. calculable and discrete groups (akin to the demographic mode), it effectively limits the free play and interactions of dynamic social bodies in flux and thus dynamic qualities of political efficacy. (Blom 129)



It is my contention that a designer's intent is of little importance compared to the activity's affect through cultural acquisition. Further, to force the point of intent and methodology is to force a logic that dismisses the possibility of equitable social relations. We can look to the heyday of twentieth century modernism and the fine art idea of the ideal viewer to understand this relationship. The ideal viewer of modern art was someone who is passive and receptive to the internal necessity of the art moment and capable of compartmentalizing their political and economic character. This is what critic Clement Greenberg meant by the term "aesthetic distance". (Costello 221) The ideal viewer was thus made incapable of anticipating the social character of visual culture and ineffective in its mediation. As Greenberg himself described the place of art, and thus the role of the viewer:

[W]hen no aesthetic value judgment, no verdict of taste, is there, then art isn't there either, then aesthetic experience of any kind isn't there. ... it's as simple as that. ... I don't mean that art shouldn't ever be discussed in terms other than those of value or quality ... What I plead for is a more abiding awareness of the substance of art as value and nothing but value, amid all the excavating of it for meanings that have nothing to do with art as art. (qtd. in Costello 218)

The idea of the modern viewer has not so much become outmoded as exaggerated; a purification of the regressive ideal. The updating of this logic encounters an account of concretized populations that are limited by the rigidity

of the points of access afforded them. In fine art terms this may mean the ever increasing expertise a viewer must possess in order to access contemporary work. Tied to this we must remember Bourdieu's work in understanding the direct relationship of the acquisition of 'objects' of cultural significance and the acquisition of economic and political capital. (13) In terms of the designed environment this might mean a plethora of dysfunctions, with for example the resultant inability of populaces to produce for their own needs from the ubiquity of commodification---a dysfunction of the capitalist marketplace which evidence designed parameters so enveloping that they inhibit differentness in access. (Rushkoff. n. pag.) So the fine art viewer must necessarily be subservient to the expression of the individuality of the artist in their passivity. Likewise, the recipients of design intervention are subjectified and concretized through design parameters, and then made passive receivers of the affect of methodology. In other words, through method fetishism the subjects of intervention (the population as it relates to the site) are made subservient.

Craft re-form for the purposes of this project is premised in contending with the dynamic social relations of the fluid present and future populations that this activity affects. Both the textual and formal modes of the project are designed, but it is the processes of acquisition and re-activation that are primary. In this sense, ethical design takes form as the opening up of possibilities of access to and through the experience, with a concomitant increase in the possibilities of unplanned results. The display of the thesis objects should be understood in these terms, as a whole site inter-relating the social potentials of

the participants and the pressures from the myriad and competing institutionalized sensibilities. The display of the objects of this project, as merely a component of the site, took two separate modes. The first manipulation was staged for the opening reception and remained that way for approximately one week after. Here I will term this mode the feel of unintended denigration. The objects were grouped in a location in the gallery demarcated specifically for my contribution to the group exhibition. The second permutation took shape in response to the exhibition as a whole, and here the stage-crafting including the location of display were modified for affect.

The overall exhibition design mode was determined collaboratively between the Gallery Director Tom Braswell and a majority of the exhibiting students. This mode sought to approximate the feel of multiple one-person exhibitions within a shared space. The exhibiting students were responsible for designing and staging their individual spaces and the director was responsible for intervening in the displays in order to achieve cohesiveness as a whole exhibition. Space was acquired by students through a negotiative process in a meeting that all exhibiting students were invited to, but not all attended. As intended, I did not negotiate for space and was granted an area the other students did not want.

In anticipating this exhibition as a social site, it is important to note the assumptions that come along with these basic parameters. First, the notion of individual spaces representing multiple one-person exhibitions within a shared

space attempts to dismiss the possibilities of interaction, including the interactions of different modes and products of production, and also crucially different sensibilities re-produced through these modes as well as possibilities of interplay and antagonism. Thus the fine art attitude of diminishing the possibility of contamination was acted out. Further, the director's role of establishing a cohesive exhibition establishes the idea of unity as a central tenet of the overall exhibition. Unity is tantamount to individuality and reaffirms the exhibition space as a site devoid of the antagonisms of difference. These two interventions, the student's demarcation and grouping and the director's unifying mediations acted effectively together. The act of grouping seeks to enact the presence of pure and individuating space and the act of unifying seeks to eliminate the formal presence of difference. The character of a socially dynamic site, as the alternative to the homogeneity of the fine art space, is effaced in order to present the primacy of the latter.

Of the exhibiting artists, several (including myself) worked in what is typically considered a craft concentration including textile design, metal design, wood design and ceramics design. The forms for display that the artists produced took on a wide range of characters, from mundane (worldly design) to spectacular (transcendent spectacle). These object logics were many times disconnected from the foundation of sensibilities that inform the respective area of concentration they represented, with even the material of production connected with the concentration up for negotiation. Thus the work presented in the exhibition by the various thesis students were varied in their bid for

significance and not tied to the typical constraints of their concentrations. While an in depth analysis of the constituent works of the exhibition is beyond the scope of this project, these generalizations and the preceding conclusions can be made to inform the social space of the exhibition, and thus the effectiveness of the formal contribution of this thesis. For instance, we can say that whatever possibilities for sensual interaction the logic of the display provides, the code of conduct of the gallery space as well as the inhibitions enforced through the logic of the architecture as uncontaminated space (white walls, spotlight, pedestal use, foyer as transformative space etc.), enables gallery-goers only a visual and passive experience. We can easily look to the activities of institutional critique, which has a significant presence in the art archive, to understand ocular passivity as an effective strategy of fabricating the autonomy of artwork and the artist. (Costello 221) A part of the predicament of studio craft, as noted earlier in the text, is that in order to find significance in the gallery space they are subject to the pressures of the social norms and active mediations of the gallery frame. This pressure acts to dismiss much of the character of craftwork that we would otherwise find significance in---craft as an encounter with skill, material, discursive characters of quality and approximations of function (at least in terms of a person's points of access). The privileging of the passive ocular mode is both the affirmation of a fine art argument of cultural transcendence as well as the negation of the political and economic focus that craftwork presents. The fine art institution is highly effective in negating the multiple and contingent character of craftwork precisely because it is this contingent character that so effectively

unravels the structure of the fine art argument. The management of the frame of craftwork is crucial for the art institutions reproductive activities. In practice, we rarely see what we call craftwork and fine art displayed in the same space. Even in context with this MFA exhibition, the practice of grouping work into autonomous zones effectively contains the different arguments for significance. Not only does the activity of fine art display denigrate craftwork through the dismissal of its multiple points of access and significance (the limitation of its logic of significance), but in its segregatory practice denies the possibility of an alternative argument.

The first mode of display for the objects of this thesis project took place in the exhibition space allocated for my work. This space was in the rear and to one side of the gallery and was perhaps twelve feet square. By all accounts it was meager compared to the other students' spaces without even mentioning that this space served double duty as exhibition space and throughway from the gallery space to the administrative offices, as well as the forming point for the buffet line at the opening reception. This does not necessarily speak to the status relationship of craft and fine art, but I think effectively proves that the gallery is competitive space, as one would expect from the constraints of the exhibition. I placed all five articles of wood-work within this space in slightly different configurations. The weaving bench was placed on a pedestal while the rest were placed on the floor and against the walls, leaving an adequate walkway to the back offices. The weaving bench, the little branch table, the ash and soil bench were labeled with their descriptive titles and materials. The chairs were unlabeled

and placed against the back wall, where a structural pillar half hid them. They were all spot-lit and no signage was used to indicate how gallery goers were to access them. The inconsistent assignment of display frames for these objects was meant to imply a degeneration of the value of these gallery mediations directly related to my perception of the relative interventional significance of the objects. The gallery-goers would have access to a deteriorating sense of fine art significance directly related to an increasing sense of mundanity as a productive and significant moment, if of course the design intent reached fruition. As far as I could tell from observation and anecdote, nobody touched the weaving bench, despite its obvious drawers that one could investigate only through touching and pulling. On the other hand, many people sat in the chairs. Some of them did this surreptitiously while others felt entitled to access. Others still sat in them without recognizing their status as objects on display. It is not clear if the inverse relationship of the gallery frame to the significance of the display forms as craftwork was effective. It was at least implicitly clear that the display of these objects as it stood ghettoized their significance. Part of the wager of this display mode was that this ghettoization would actually foreground the relationship of these objects to other objects of spectacular display, and that it could establish a dialogue (whether internal or external) about the roles of these various framing elements and the displacement of cultural significance. In sum, this display sought to dismiss the mediations of the gallery space and inhabit the denigrated space of craft-work in the fine art gallery. The denigration was apparent, however it is unclear if the argument was.

The second mode of display sought to expand the interventional capacities of the work. Here, I left the weaving bench as the only object in the space still labeled and spot-lit. I did, however, replace the traditional pedestal with a small table of solid wood which was traditionally joined and painted white. The little branch table, the ash/soil bench and the chairs were moved to the foyer. The little branch table acquired two mason jars filled with paint and labeled with the mix code for their respectively branded colors, moss green and daffodil. They were placed on a plinth, painted a color branded dogwood petal. These were in turn placed on top of the table which was located next to the closed caption security screen. The ash/soil bench was pushed to the side of the foyer in front of a large window in a place where one would expect a piece of seating furniture in a foyer. Likewise the chairs were pushed against a far wall sharing proximity with electronic boxes inset in the wall and pedestals displaying various unattributed objects of clay-work as display of the gallery's permanent collection. These mediations offered several advantages over the first mode of display. First, breaking out of the allocated space in the gallery allowed for the possibility of short circuiting the containing autonomy of the mode of the multiple one-person shows. The introduction of the table as pedestal, the jars of paint and the bench placement next to the window more explicitly fore-grounded the skepticism and ambivalence that characterizes the logic of these objects. The use of the foyer space itself, as the transformative and preparatory space for the gallery experience further positioned this creative activity as related but not amenable to the fine art mode and its mediations. Each of these displays offered moments of



success, even if only in terms of the possibilities of analysis and approximations of anticipating an audience. To reiterate, I view this exhibition as one re-imagining of the place of craft-work as a social and interventional site---an approximation of anticipating the political and economic character of the participants in exchange and different ways to act ethically and effectively. It is therefore a beginning and certainly not to be assessed as either a complete whole or in terms of its resolution. Instead, success in terms of this complete project should be measured in the proliferation of possibilities (for access and discovery) and the means to come to grips in meaningful ways with the unresolved.

## Conclusion

This report sought to identify a history and a context for craft. It addressed the habits that formed craft as well as the habits that formed the fields it shelters within. It discussed the ideological character of the reproduction of those habits. It also identified two modes of ideological reproduction: the interpenetration of ideological hegemony as expressed by Louis Althusser and the field of informational technologies proliferated through the action of *government at a distance*, or what Michel Foucault called *bio-power*. It identified our contemporary environment as a field of hyper-individuation as well as a site of increased potential for sociality. Finally, it offered concrete examples of the re-imagining of craft as a site of sociality in the form of critique of David Pye and Roy McMakin and then an account of praxis in the MFA exhibition.

This practice forms a framework for rethinking craft. This was initiated in the tension of craft's obvious shortcomings as framed by fine art, i.e. the mundane and material character of its internal logic as opposed to the purifying and dis-corporating desires (as fact) of fine art. This contradiction finds only further unresolved tension with the perpetual fine art discourse comprised of the relationship of craft versus fine art, as in when and how can craft be perceived as an autonomous discipline of fine art, or how can fine art maintain its boundaries in the face of populist craft pressure. As Ina Blom speaks to the debate

surrounding art as opposed to design, we see conditions external to it shaping its parameters:

This specific framing of the utopianism of the present ... stages the historical relations between art, design, and utopian desires, putting art's contradictory relations to both responsible planning *and* surprise invention, time management *and* temporal escape, into free play. These are the antagonistic dimensions of art's own sociality, endlessly debated and fought over; the contemporary aestheticization processes only render them more acute. This perspective cannot simply be reconciled with the more idealistic notions of the "need" to break down the barriers between art and design and the special capacity of avant-garde art to front this particular need. If there is a perceived need to break down the barriers between art and design, it is because this need is now economic through and through. (148)

The internal discourse that effectively consolidated art and design as reified and autonomous bodies is under pressure from the processes of politics and economics that heretofore were dismissed. Thus a re-imagining of these fields as a material and relational site are not only possible, but unavoidable.

The framework this project sets in place is an attempt to locate craft as a historical mode with material consequences. From here we can contend with the values that are reproduced in its embodiment---its ideological reproduction of status values and its concomitant exploitation. This project locates certain

regressive attitudes included in craft's activity of reproduction, but here an attempt is made to not do so monolithically. Ideological reproduction is ambivalent and shifting. What I propose instead is that we take responsibility for the habits we extol, and through this framework propose a way to contend with the process of ideological transmission in craft. Thus the deconstructive analysis and the strategies for intervention relate as a whole process to this end. The force of this activity is the setting up of craft as a relational site. The question then is how to re-imagine craft, and here it is worth repeating that there is nothing essential---no internal truth---about craft to source as re-imaginative inventory. Craft is a historical mode that has been reified through status relations. The strategies employed in this project are intended to deconstruct the reification process while using the logic that that process assigns to it (referred in the report as its *internal logic*) as re-sourceable inventory. Among those are craft's tradition of skill in action, its material focus and its approach, as a locus for, viewers and users as enabled bodies. Craft also offers modes like the demonstration and the educational workshop as enactments of potential sociality squarely within craft's logic of production.

The MFA exhibition component of this project allowed for praxis for this framework. It evidenced both successes and failures, and located this project as a start to, and certainly not a definitive containment of, craft as a relational site. One dysfunction of the process is that much of the mode of craft as a sociality is produced through critique and negation of the fine art mode. The problem in this method is the reactionary attitude that forms the feel of this craft enactment. By

moving explicitly against regressive attitudes it risks bringing them back, even in their negative, and delimits the range of imaginative form for a social craft to the frame of its negative. A more productive approach may lie outside of the critique of fine art and as a field of relations on its own terms. A similar recapitulation occurs with the re-source of frames of enactment, like for example the use of the museum space as a site of engagement. The museum space, like other tools of institutional support, is foremost an administrative tool whose job it is to enable the politics of the institution. Thus the logic of these tools, even used transgressively, threatens to diminish even the most provocative enactments. Moving forward, I believe there is considerable room to negotiate through these pitfalls. I think the methods of sociability established in Ina Blom's account of the transparent/pragmatic versus the opaque/reflexive, i.e. dialogical aesthetics versus a style site encounter offers particular promise toward growing the ideas in this project.

I do not believe craft as it is, is in any particular danger of extinguishment any more than, for example, modern art. Both of these fields feel pressure from a shifting political economy, for sure, and a good portion of their respective discourse is centered on protecting their boundaries. Despite that, their respective institutional claims remain solid, with each in their own right reaping the rewards of elite cultural status. I believe it is clear, however, that craft in its current form is unable to approach the relations of contemporary production in either an effective or ethical way. And this is the point of this project. This project is not exhaustive. As noted earlier, there are dysfunctions in enactment and

certainly more questions to ask and more depths to plumb. I believe that it is, however, a productive frame toward imagining a relational craft.

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Appendix



Plate 1. Weaving Bench (On Table)  
Photo by Chris Anderson.



Plate 2. Little Branch Table.  
Photo by Chris Anderson.