

A handcrafted ceramic vessel, possibly a chalice or goblet, is the central focus. It features a wide, scalloped rim and a body with a green and orange glaze. The lower portion of the body is decorated with vertical, ribbed patterns. The vessel sits on a dark, textured base. The background is dark and textured.

CRAFT

Perception and Practice

Volume II

a Canadian discourse

Edited by Paula Gustafson

This article was published in the Spring 2001 issue of *Artichoke: Writings about the Visual Arts*, Vol. 13, No. 1.

TOWARD A UNIFIED THEORY OF CRAFTS: The Reconciliation of Differences

by Paul Mathieu

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

Hierarchies and polarities are interesting and at times useful, but are they really relevant to a discussion about art and craft? For a long time I thought so, and I attempted to resolve the differences as a dialectic between art and craft. In the contradiction of opposites, I made long lists of polarities and dualities:

Art is high	Craft is low
Art is elitist	Craft is popular
Art is visual	Craft is tactile
Art is image	Craft is object
Art is eye	Craft is hand
Art is cerebral	Craft is manual
Art is metaphysical	Craft is physical
Art is conceptual	Craft is material
Art is concept	Craft is precept
Art is idea	Craft is matter
Art is talk	Craft is action
Art is mind	Craft is heart
Art is male	Craft is female
Art is passive	Craft is active
<i>(interesting unexpected reversal here)</i>	
Art is contemplative	Craft is of the world
Art is inside	Craft is outside
Art is asocial	Craft is social
Art is immoral	Craft is moral

Art is false	Craft is authentic
Art is a lie	Craft is truth
Art is individual	Craft is community
Art is personality	Craft is anonymity
Art is innovation	Craft is tradition
Art is beauty	Craft is utility
Art is useless	Craft is useful
Art is museum	Craft is house
Art is cemetery	Craft is home
Art is dead	Craft is alive
Art is Death	Craft is Life
Art is transient	Craft is permanent
Art is immobile	Craft is mobile
Art is space	Craft is time
Art is content	Craft is the container
Art is representation	Craft is presentation
Art is framed	Craft is the frame

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

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

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

A few years ago, I was teaching ceramics in a university program at the undergraduate level. One day, I assisted at the presentation given by a British author, art critic, theoretician, and curator, who was speaking about his research activities to the graduate students in visual arts. His talk was centred on a show he had recently curated, bringing together the very diverse works of a group of Third World artists. His principal interest in these artists lay in his attempt to grasp and understand, at the conceptual level, what were the possible links between these diverse practices, beyond

issues of content like colonialism, economic disparity, cultural imperialisms, and gender/racial conflicts. One of the artists worked with dried gourd vessels as installations, both within nature and in the gallery space. Another used embroidery on clothing and fabrics. A performance artist pierced the human body with jewellery and metal works. Another focussed on painted skin, body markings, and tattoos. The last one, I recall, used the motif of oriental carpets on large billboards installed in the urban environment.

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

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

Contrary to art theory, art practices are evermore inclusive in their approach. The Arts and Crafts Movement, the Bauhaus, and most avant-garde manifestos have all strived to reconcile art and life and to destroy the barriers between practices and media. In a variety of ways this rationalization has

198 | been repeated ceaselessly for more than 150 years. In actuality, nothing much has changed.

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

If we accept these premises that anything and everything can be art (which I do), it automatically implies that anything and everything craft is also art, insofar as craft is simply another form of art, another category within art like painting, sculpture, photography, design, architecture, etc. But note how the last three — photography, design, architecture — have been readily accepted as art forms. Is this due to their privileged position within the power structure where art operates? All three can be efficiently exhibited. Conversely, craft objects are not intended to be exhibited. That is not how they operate, nor how they are meant to be experienced.

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

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

Searching for theories of craft, I found practical answers in the essay, “Other Other Spaces” [*Diacritics*, Spring 1985, vol. 16, no. 1], by French theoretician and philosopher Michel Foucault. I wrote at length on this

reading in an article, “The Space of Pottery,” which was published in *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, *Studio Potter*, and elsewhere. To summarize, Foucault writes about specific spaces within culture that behave in certain ways. Their shared characteristics include universality, a specific relation to time, juxtaposition, ritual, change and transformation. He names these spaces heterotopias or “other spaces” to differentiate them not only from any spaces, but most importantly from utopias or what we know as art works; that is, ideal, unreal spaces (remember representation?). This epistemological approach — defining how we understand and know certain things — helped me greatly to expand my understanding of crafts (“other spaces”) as both theory and practice. Even so, it felt incomplete. As theory, it remained too complex, with too many characteristics to be cohesive. I wanted something simpler.

The writings and ideas of others are very useful here. I am very struck by Nova Scotia College of Art and Design president Paul Greenhalgh’s notion of a “conceptual constant” in crafts: that there exists a seamless continuity in time and in society as a continuum; the notion that crafts do not change; that a bowl, no matter when, with what, how, or by whom it is made, is always conceptually the same object. (At long last, an aspect of craft that is clearly conceptual, universal and timeless!)

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

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

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

This division between art and craft exists only at the level of institutional academia. It hardly exists at all at the level of practice. From the Renaissance through the Victorian Age, through Modernism and the creation of art history as a discipline, through the rise of theory during the twentieth century as well as the ever-progressive institutionalization of art, art has been taken away from its practitioners, the artists, and it has now become the almost exclusive domain of academicians, historians, critics, curators, theoreticians, and all the art bureaucrats. They have created this division between art and craft, and all the concomitant political implications. There is a great need, I believe, for art to be rescued from these people; for theory to be wrestled away from them. (If artists don't eventually do it, maybe craftspeople should.) The lessons of Duchamp and Beuys have not been learned. The obsession with personality, and the myths of celebrity rampant in art circles (intent on validating their own institutions), have prevented Duchamp's and Beuys's examples from becoming universal.

In 1994, I was asked by *Studio Potter* magazine to contribute an essay on "The Search for a Unified Theory of Crafts." A variety of writers and makers were asked to give the topic a try. The very diverse responses included an analysis of the "moral" aspects and social relevance of crafts, the supposition that crafts define universal "truths," and the assertion that crafts embody "authenticity" in their potential as documentation and as witness. The essays also repeatedly stated that craft is "making," that craft has a spiritual dimension — bordering on the sublime at times — and craft implies "truth" in transformation. Some writers looked into craft's role within culture and society, its cultural value, its historical development, its archeology, as well as its origins in language and its semantic roots. Again,

words “skill, process, material, function, use, ritual, touch” kept recurring. The final result was closer to a confused theory than a unified one.

A UNIFIED THEORY OF CRAFT

If the hand, the material, the tool; if skill, function, tradition, history; if universality, ritual, juxtaposition, change and time; if none of these is of any help — since they place emphasis on the transformative and experiential aspects of craft and neglect its conceptual nature — what then is the one characteristic at the conceptual level that is shared by all craft practices and all craft objects?

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

How often have we seen paintings in museums exhibited in frames that were carved and painted by the artist. On the identification label it simply states “oil on canvas” — with no mention of the frame whatsoever! Total invisibility of the craft object, even when it is was made by the artist himself! Another example: Brancusi’s *Bird in Flight* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York is described on the label as “polished bronze” with no mention whatsoever of an integral component: the plinth made of wood, marble, and cement.

What is, within art, the ultimate craft object? The frame. The frame is the ultimate container for painting. In sculpture, the equivalent is the plinth. Yet the frame and the plinth (a form of furniture) do not exist within the art discourse. Does their function (and function is the conceptual part

of tools) render them irrelevant? Could it be because they are closer to craft than to art? The frame or the plinth is the space, the place, the site where things change. Frames create what contemporary deconstruction theory calls “epistemological breaks” or shifts in meaning. In cosmological terms, the frame is the “event horizon,” hiding the singularity within the black hole. Is the frame, the plinth any less important conceptually than the image? Which is more important, the shell or the egg, the bird or the cage? The frame defines a territory; it establishes a frontier. The frame fixes the image, and the image is by definition fixed (even with television). The frame — the container — is, on the contrary, mobile. You can always change the frame (and change channels). The frame is the “space between” — it connects to reality and it connects two realities; it connects art to the real world. It is “interstitial,” a term used by U.S. critic John Perreault to define a characteristic of craft objects. In psychology, the term would be “transitional object.” All of these terms define, in various ways, the operative qualities of frames, of containers, as well as craft objects.

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

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

By this reconciliation of extremes, a theory of containment, a unified theory of craft brings together art and craft, not as opposites but as complementaries. This is why crafts have so much to teach the world, and the art world in particular, both of which constantly strive, it seems, for division and conflict.

Contrary to previous attempts at a theory of craft, this unified theory is not based on history (tradition), or materials, or technique, or on the hand. It is based on concept, which is the very base of theory.☺