

Crafting new attitudes on CRAFT

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Throughout the years, along with the change of generations, the student's ability to engage with 21st century making techniques has changed. More and more of the young students entering the academy are not skilled in working with material or the various technologies of the workshops. As much as this seems a disadvantage, it turns out to be an advantage in the end, since they have the opportunity of acquiring material knowledge in their own terms. By enabling them to experiment with different techniques and materials and by pointing out how every aspect of the learning process is a potential source of ideas, their creativity is triggered. The goal for us as educators is not to provide them with a receipt or a clear notion of right or wrong, but to encourage them to find for themselves what the "quality" they seek in their work is. Stretching the limits of the specific techniques they are thought in the workshops, maybe using some of the machinery in a completely new manner, brings up new visual potential for them.

We experience a shift in the cultural patterns. All the accelerated rhythm of existence makes the craft knowledge of the past centuries an obsolete information, since the majority of the young generation is focused on learning the new knowledge developed around the digital language. The analogue means of production, which require an accumulation of experience, are gradually discarded, thus throwing an entire category of makers in a crisis. Things look nowadays similar with the moment when Art and Crafts movement emerged. This movement, specific for the end of the 19th century, was a reaction to the sudden change brought by the industrialization of the economy. The movement advocated for the preservation of traditional craftsmanship. It had a considerable influence on arts in Europe, especially in Great Britain, manifesting itself mainly in the decorative arts fields. It advocated the idea of including the disappearing crafts, in the artists practice. I find this historical moment very similar to our current age when digital tools slowly replace techniques and crafts developed throughout the 20th century and before.

There is a clash of technologies and the attitude towards production of objects shifts. Such times are very prosperous in terms of information sharing and usually in such times new trends emerge. Makers strive to adapt and to pass on their knowledge, so they make use of internet as a dissemination platform. Channels of information like YouTube are one of the most preferred manner people choose to share such knowledge. The video format of tutorial is a construct that becomes more and more established as the choice of passing technical information. The availability of recording devices and the unsophisticated requirements, when filming such video material, made it possible for a huge database of tutorials to be generated. There are tutorials that teach the interested viewer how to do almost anything, these platforms becoming the perfect environment for craft knowledge preservation.

In such a rich informational environment, young minds can put to a test the craziest thoughts that pass their minds and I believe that by encouraging them to research this type of information and try it out, the meaning of what we call craft for the future can be totally changed. The differentiation

between material crafts and the digital crafts will no longer exist; they will be fused with each other in a game of creative experimentation.

In spite of the lack of skills, among young art students there is a strong drive to embrace a D.I.Y. attitude towards making. I presume it has to do with the rupture between the consumer and the source of their goods. The advanced consumerism and the economic models developed around the production of goods have alienated humans from the source of the objects that are part of their life. Consumer goods, meant to improve our lives, are manufactured in abundance becoming cheaper and cheaper. There is no logic in producing furniture for yourself since you cannot produce it at a lower price than is sold in certain stores.

This attitude that, governed by profit margin, is designed to push the consumer to keep buying, makes quickly a lot of products obsolete. They end up discarded completely before their functionality is exhausted. No one repairs broken goods, so there is no contact whatsoever with the technology embedded in a functional object. Sometimes products are manufactured using cheap types of materials, being designed for a short lifespan and are actually impossible to repair.

I believe this distance between the humans and the source of their everyday items, triggers in the younger generations, which were brought up in this economic climate, a desire to understand how to reappropriate the act of making. The richness of information available through the World Wide Web enables anyone to embrace such attitude.

The student is no longer bound to the traditional relation master apprentice. One can choose, if interested in Marquetry for example, to inform himself from a craftsman from Great Britain, to see how this craft is done in Indonesia or United States of America. The richness of sources offers an overview on the various techniques that are part of the trade. On the other hand, the nature of this openness in information and the browsing mentality, characteristic for this communication platform, breaks the sacred act of commitment to a certain master. The education within a trade used to be governed by the apprentice being accepted by a master. That was the starting point of learning a craft and usually this came with a responsibility towards the master. The hierarchical system within a workplace contributed to the build-up of character and to the understanding of the work ethics developed by the craftsman. The slow feed of technical knowledge trained the apprentice's other abilities, like the one to observe and to appropriate information about the craft without it being verbally communicated. The sum of these experiences produced a learning context that could be lived only in the space of the traditional workshop. These experiences are not embedded in the information communicated through the media platforms of the internet.

The identity of what we named craft is morphing, but still the core idea in the attitude of the maker seems to remain true.

According to Richard Sennett: "Craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake."

What seem to be changed are the parameters of what well is supposed to mean. It looks like the notion of quality among the new generations of art students do not coincide with the commercial standard we might tend to use as an evaluation. There are completely different criteria over what each individual understands through quality and they are dictated by multiple factors as, cultural background, gender, native ability to work with different techniques. Nevertheless, it seems that more and more students are driven to tryout in their own terms to develop a craft knowledge, very few being set off by their initial lack of manual abilities.

Peter Dormer in his book “The Art of the Maker” defines craft knowledge:

- a) “Craft knowledge is not easily described by language and in many cases resists a complete description. Writing about an action, talking about an action and reflecting upon the nature of an action are not the same thing as the action itself, nor do they provide much insight into how it feels to act and how it feels to know for oneself how to act.
- b) Craft knowledge is often difficult or even impossible to translate into theory or to encode (for the purpose of computing) into mathematical or logical seduction.
- c) Craft knowledge is not something you think about if you are an expert in it: as an expert you do not think about the exercise of your craft. You do, however, think about extending your expertise and about the goals to which you are applying it.
- d) Craft knowledge is harder to acquire through books than it is face to face with a skilled practitioner and teacher.”

In the past centuries, the ritual within a workshop was governed by a mechanism that required this apprentice, master connection. The sounds that the metal makes when hammered, the precise hue of scorching red before being hardened, the way wood cracks when hit in a certain point with an axe, the movements of glass blowers in a glass blowing workshop, all this knowledge was a tacit knowledge. Such knowledge cannot be articulated or explained it resides in the master and gets transmitted to the apprentice through a common practice.

This mechanism is being reinvented; the creative makers are no longer governed by the need of manufacturing a commercially viable family of goods that need to fulfil certain conditions. There are specialized companies that can do that efficiently in a globalized market. What I believe we are living now is a moment of transition to a new mentality on craft, one announcing the future of the creative domains. What is characteristic for this future generations of creative is the hacking, they hack the cycle of passing knowledge, they shorten the time of learning by sustaining and accessing a constant feed of information using internet-based platforms. The presence of open source platforms, D.I.Y tutorials, old techniques that are documented through independent instructional videos, software tutorials from a very diverse array of sources, forums of discussion for almost everything one can imagine, all these contribute to the hacking of old systems of passing knowledge.

I wonder though what do we lose by gaining time and flexibility or are we losing anything at all. There are fast means of production and prototyping that seem to be the ideal tools: printers, Rizo printers, digital imaging, C.N.C cutters, laser cutters, a various array of 3D printers and scanners, one might think why should an art student waste any second on absorbing any of the old techniques of working with materials. As humanity we have been spending our entire evolution changing the world around us, we learned how to shape matter we fabricated tools to be able to shape a world of our own but we were always conditioned by the materials we chose to use, by their natural quality, hardness, elasticity, buoyancy, brittleness. Now we passed that stage. The machinery to cut or print following a 3D digital model disregards the properties of the material being used. In front of a fast spinning milling cutter, wood, plastic, metal, stone is similar, they are shaped in an almost identical manner, neglecting the specific techniques developed around them in hundreds of years. I prize the advantages brought by respecting the matter one is working with. What I understand by respecting the material is allowing it to manifest its characteristics within the process of shaping it. Brancusi was stating “...you cannot make what you want to make, but what the material permits you to make. You cannot make out of marble what you would make out of wood, or out of wood what you would make out of stone... Each material has its own life, and one cannot without punishment destroy a living material to make a dumb senseless thing. That is, we must not try to make materials speak our own language; we must go with them to the point where others will understand their language.”

Brancusi in his work strived to reduce representation to essence to information. He finds ways to refine the shape embedding notions about the represented subject in this shape. Through its material presence, the sculpture he makes, loses the weight of the detail specific for the portrayed subject, becoming information about the subject's existence. For instance, in his works "Bird in space" or "Fish" he can do this only by knowing the properties of the stone or metal he uses, only by understanding the tactility of it. He states "When working on stone one discovers the Spirit hidden in the matter; the measurement of its own existence. The sculptor's hands are always thinking and they always follow the thought of the material."

I am fully aware that the creative practitioner of nowadays cannot operate outside the new technologies. It is absurd to discard all these new possibilities the digital tools are opening up. New technologies come with new attitudes, with a new materiality. Even if the unpredictability of working manually with matter and learning from that is mediated through computer-controlled machinery, there is a different set of unpredictable events that can produce unexpected outcomes. The glitch is our new accident. The efficient thinking and the desire for exquisite works can easily accompany us into the new practices involving materials. There is a seductive re-emergence of the handmade object though of the attitude towards production that operates outside economic viability. People are not impressed anymore by the novelty of digital tools, since they became the normality. There is a desire for palpable objects that carry investment of time and skill from the part of the maker. This is the ideal time for attempting to blend into a single attitude all the different views of what craftsmanship should become. Recuperating older crafts opens multiple possibilities in understanding how the new crafts are going to look like. I strongly believe that as artist translating old crafts into new practices where the blending of digital means of production flow naturally alongside traditional approaches on making, can shape the identity of the future craftsman.