This exhibition is devoted to the notion that fine craft has significance. Typically, the reaction to such a proposition is skepticism. Even seasoned craftsmen counter that workmanship is devoid of meaning by itself: it's only a tool in the service of the artist's ideas or his sensibility. Others will say this exhibition is political: the purpose is nothing more than a bid for respect, and thus power, on the art scene. Maybe they're right. But I suspect that something else is a foot, that an underlying reason explains why some artists consistently go to an incredible amount of bother to produce their work so carefully. To the best of my knowledge, this proposition has never been addressed in an exhibition before.

Sculpture and ornament produced by trained metalsmiths and jewelers are used here as examples, although one could also find cases in painting, printmaking, ceramics, or any other visual art form employing physical material. Christina DePaul chose metalsmithing because she is trained in the field herself, because her own work relies on precise workmanship, and because she is acquainted with a number of artists in the field. Conveniently, metalsmithing is heir to a long tradition of precision and control, and much of the work emerging in this field would serve to illustrate the thesis. In fact, historical metal objects could prove the point adequately, but we determined that contemporary production would make the case more vivid.

The subject here is excellent craftsmanship. I'm not considering the everyday fabrication of things, but a way of making that necessitates taking special pains, that is meticulous and careful. Fine craftsmanship is usually distinguished by a refusal to rely on accidental or aleatory occurrences. (The handling of paint in an abstract-expressionist canvas is the antithesis of fine craft.) Instead, the material is totally in the control of the craftsman. Such mastery is marked by uniform surfaces, where any variation is carefully planned and executed, and by a complete competence in the multitudes of possibilities any medium offers. Extraordinary craftsmanship is sometimes visible only to practitioners, but it is commonly revealed by an overall degree of finish and control of gesture. In my experience, most observers know precious little of what actually constitutes fine crasftsmanship. Instead, they easily recognize its superficial signs. The kind of workmanship I am addressing here is the kind that only initiates understand: it is far more than surface gloss. However, I do not intend to dwell on the difficulty of craft, but its implications.

Conventional wisdom in the fine arts establishment regards fine craftsmanship with suspicion. An artist who employs precision and a high degree of finish is risking permanent obscurity on the art scene. Certainly this sounds like a paranoid remark, but I speak from extensive

personal experience. I have been told a number of times by curators and gallery owners that the craftsmanship of my work distracts from the content, with the obvious implication that if I handled material more freely, the work would be better. A perusal of any major exhibition of contemporary art will reveal very little that has been carefully rendered and polished. A perusal of Artforum or Artnews will meet with a similar conclusion. While this prejudice against careful fabrication may be more prevalent in New York than Chicago or Los Angeles, metalsmiths who aspire to the status of artist - and a number of them do - are playing in a game with the deck stacked against them.

Even the subject of craftsmanship, like Rodney Dangerfield, doesn't get much respect. The Director of the Akron Museum, when approached about sponsoring this exhibition, remarked that craft is not an issue, and dismissed the proposal. Even some of the participants in this show claim that fine craft is a given, and refuse to consider the question any further. The sole book on the subject, The Nature of Art and Workmanship by David Pye, is basically a categorization of types of finish, and does little to examine the meaning of fine crafts.

The reasons for the situation I have outlined are many and varied, but I will be foolish enough to offer some speculation as to why.

One must go back to the point where craft was divorced from painting and sculpture to find the root of the problem. In the middle Renaissance, European painting was regarded as a lesser arm of goldsmithing, because the goldsmith's guild had monopoly control over the pigments that painters used. Thus, many of the early Italian Renaissance painters started work in the atelier of a jeweler. As the guilds weakened, painting was organized into Academies, which in turn proposed the hierarchy of form in the visual arts. Oil painting was held to be the superior form, with stone and bronze sculpture second, and the various crafts a distant third. (Within painting, historical subjects gained ascendancy, while still lifes were held to be the lowest form.)

Art became an intellectual activity, which at the time was modelled after Aristotelian structure. That is to say, all phenomena were organized into hierarchies, with one type superior and another inferior within a single category. Because Aristotle held the ideal to be superior to any physical phenomenon - parallel to the classical mind/body division in Western metaphysics - a phenomenon more closely allied with mental activity was placed above a physical activity. Thus history painting, which stressed noble and ideal subjects, was placed above still life, which used mundane reality as its model. And thus painting was placed above

craft, since craft was associated with dirty physical labor and with fulfilling physical functions. Craft became the realm of the body, while art became the realm of the mind.

The hierarchy of form must be understood as a bid for power and respect by the field of painting as it tried to shake of the control of craft guilds. Luckily for painters, it worked. Unluckily for craftsmen, it established a linkage with inferior status that has proven surprisingly resilient. Anything intimately connected to forms of craft were guilty by association. A functional object became inferior to a functionless one - a pot was inferior to a painting.

Eventually, the discernment of quality on the basis of an analogy to Aristotle's primacy of the ideal hardened into dogma. Like most unproven articles of faith, it has since proven to be a most durable assumption. In spite of reams of revolutionary proclamations by modern artists, and in spite of every claim that the past had finally been finally transcended, a curious distaste for craft and craft contexts persists among intellectuals in the art world. How many contemporary functional clay pots are seen in major New York galleries? When was the last time a weaving was seen in the Whitney Biennial? Since Peter Voulkos had a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in the mid-50's, have there been any solo shows by a craftsman or woman in a major New York art museum? None, never, and no.

I cite this evidence both as a complaint and as proof of a pervasive mind-set. The pretensions to liberation and advanced thinking claimed by the art world never extended to craft.

A related prejudice against hand-labor is also a factor. Just as Aristotle held the ideal to be superior to the physical, mental activity held to be superior to the sweat and bother of handwork. Aristotle conveniently placed philosophy at the apex of the pyramid of human endeavor, and grunt-work like farming and driving horses and making pots in the basement. Because craft has always been associated with long hours of toil and getting the hands dirty, it has long been denigrated as a low, mindless activity. The hammering of metal, the throwing of clay, the weaving of fiber are too intimately connected to the body, too close to the earth to demand respect. What we revere is control exercised by the mind: the sphere of politicians, priests, philosophers, and business executives. This prejudice remains central to our society today: while the company president sits in his office making decisions, making millions, the laborer sweats in the factory, making $5.50 an hour.

The net result is that craft is not usually thought of as inherently distinguished, nor as possessing any particular meaning. Practitioners intuitively recognize that their craft has a powerful subjective appeal, but most are unable to give a coherent voice to their perceptions. Most craftsmen are content to let their work do the talking, which makes them susceptible to all types of popular misunderstandings.

Sheer craft can be incredibly seductive, both to maker and viewer. The usual objection raised against beautifully made objects is that the quality of construction and finish seems to occupy the artist's entire attention, to the exclusion of any content or concept. Certainly, a great deal of recent American metalsmithing can be justifiably accused of being nicely made, but mindless. The sixties saw armies of shining Scandinavian-modern teapots emerge from American studios; flawless but demonstrating neither innovation nor intelligence in their design. The seventies saw hordes of enormous neckpieces made in every conceivable process. but this type of jewelry now appears to be little more than platforms for the display of virtuoso technique. Fine craftsmanship became an end of itself, and in hindsight the work produced with the sole objective of displaying beautiful craft looks empty.

The subtle attraction of fine craftsmanship is that it offers an objective standard of judgement. To a craftsman intent on learning the demanding skills of his discipline, much of his education is devoted to controlling the medium - and then learning to detect mistakes. The jeweler must learn to see pits in solder seams, slight discrepancies in alignment, and tiny patches of firescale on silver. A refined and sensitive eye must be developed. After a time, control over the medium becomes valued for itself, at least in part because such skill is so difficult to acquire. Because flawless craftsmanship can be recognized as a physical manifestation of skill, and because skill can become so important, a temptation arises to judge an object on the basis of its craftsmanship alone. After all, no one can question the existence of a pitted seam, or a patch of firescale: the evidence of imperfect craftsmanship is irrefutable. The perfect seam is good, the splotch of firescale is bad. Determination of quality on the basis of skill avoids all the pitfalls and confusions of aesthetics, and the craftsman who so judges remains in his area of expertise. No further books to read, no troubling questions to entertain - just a familiar, comfortable standard that rests on clear evidence.

For a naive audience, lovely craftsmanship can be hypnotically attractive. Perfect mirror finishes on metal, beautiful expanses of exotic wood, or almost any kind of meticulous detail all exert a powerful appeal This is the "Gee-Whiz" factor of craftsmanship: its ability to impress and allure. When my colleagues who teach painting exhort their students to forget

about the microscopic pencil rendering that passes for art in many high schools, and investigate a more active and expressive handling of the material, they are trying to undermine the "Gee-Whiz" factor. As a result, painters are often immune to the appeal of fine craft, while the general public is not.

None of this has much to do with the meaning of precise craftsmanship, however. While a successful seduction might create a feeling of affection between audience and object, it has little further significance. Just as you might go to bed with a beautiful lover at night, in the morning you discover that the relationship must be based on something more profound than infatuation. The gorgeous silver teapot or the flawless mahogany table may be an exercise in superior control over a material, but it must reveal other properties before it can offer a rich and satisfying experience for its public.

"The Concept of Craft" is devoted to the notion that fine craftsmanship has significance by itself. This is a fairly radical notion, one that is met with a great deal of resistance and misunderstanding. We are not proposing that craft should be understood as fine art; we are asserting that craftsmanship is simply not understood. Just as he apologists for action painting claimed that the process of expressionist painting had meanings with profound implications to the body of art, we claim that the process of careful making has equally important ramifications.

One of the central metaphors implicit in meticulous craft is of care, of compassion for the artist's private and social existence. This is in total opposition to notions of anomie, apathy, and social estrangement. The craftsman is engaged in his material, and by inference, in the surrounding culture. It's a positive attitude, one that disallows the gloom & doom prevalent in much "advanced" art. Careful workmanship insists on seeing value and beauty rather than corruption and destruction.

To understand fine work fully, one must sit at the workbench or the loom or the wheel, and observe the careful shaping of things. The jeweler at her bench must spend years of practice to master her craft, and then must have invested a small fortune for the tools of her trade. The very act of sitting down to work proves a commitment, an allocation of time and money that most people never undertake. But the years of preparation are only the beginning of the project.

Each time the jeweler works, she must exercise a degree of patience and skill not commonly seen in this day and age. Even the simplest of her tasks are time-consuming: sawing the

metal, filing an edge, polishing a surface. This is not the physical equivalent of microwave cooking. If anything, it is the absolute opposite. Fine craft is inconvenient, laborious, sometimes tedious. A difficult process is even more demanding: some techniques like engraving or raising can take years to master. And then, a fine eye for detail must be cultivated, so as to distinguish the minute refinements that separate mediocre craft from fine. Such skill and understanding demands considerable discipline, and such discipline is freely chosen. For a contemporary American to voluntarily assume this kind of rigor and constraint is almost miraculous. To do so, the craftsman has to care. Alot.

Consider the carelessness of work in America. Consider all the times you have returned your car to the garage because a repair wasn't properly completed, or the frustration of receiving broken merchandise in the mail because it wasn't packed well enough. Consider the reputation American automobiles have for being poorly made, or the buses in New York that caught fire because they weren't properly designed. Even nuclear powerplants are now reputed to be shoddily made and sloppily inspected, putting millions of people at risk. Everywhere, everyday, we see evidence that Americans no longer give a flying f**k about their work.

But then consider the site of whatever control we actually have over our lives. The political system is ponderous and unresponsive: everybody knows that fighting city hall takes a tremendous amount of time and energy for no certain results. The economic system is even more insulated from individual action, and most people don't really want to change it anyway. (I find it supremely ironic that the new breed of Marxist art critics are getting paid by glossy art mags, the willing tools of the capitalist art market.) For most of us, the site of our influence in the world is in our families and our work.

Although it sounds fusty and excessively Puritan to say so, a job well done has significance far beyond the act itself. Most jobs exist in a network of social causes and effects, all of which eventually touch the lives of ordinary people. The vacuum line carelessly fitted on a automobile in the factory causes a needless trip or two to the garage; the carelessly typed Social Security number in a government office causes a desperately needed check to arrive a month or two late. In this manner, quite apart from idealism or ideology, workers of every type have either a positive or a negative influence on society. A worker who takes pride in his work recognizes the implications of his labor. He understands that his job is the site of his power.

Any artist or craftswoman who insists on meticulous work knows this to be true. Her work gives physical form to the precept that a job must be done well, or the larger society suffers the consequences. The jeweler who demands an unpitted solder seam or a flawlessly uniform finish is taking a stand against shoddiness in every form. She is declaring her refusal to do shabby work; she is asserting her understanding that work has far-reaching repercussions. She recognizes that her power to cause benefit or damage lies in her craft. She announces that she cares. Of course the choice is modest; it does not pretend to be a profound transformation of society. But it is both realistic and authentic, and it refuses the cynical opinion that nothing the individual does can make a difference.

Every work in this exhibition thus represents a personal ideology, a conscious decision about the maker's relation to society. For most of these artists, the choice to work carefully is not taken lightly. They are quite serious about their preference: Their recognition of the implications of careful craft often results in a lifetime commitment.

Fine craftsmanship can also be viewed as a means to obtain a crisp, sharply focused rendition of concept. In this manner, the artist's vision is portrayed with the utmost clarity, unobscured by overheated expression or overwrought material. An analogy to the traditional metaphor of painting as window or wall is useful here: imagine the object as an opening revealing the artist's intent. If the object is a clear window, with the glass clean and completely transparent, the artist's landscape can be seen with less difficulty. Every detail and nuance is accessible for close scrutiny. But if material is handled in a freer manner, as suggested by the tenets of expressionism and the doctrine of asserting the physicality of the artist's media, the material begins to call attention to itself. Heavy impasto of paint is seen as paint, not as representation or as image, and interferes with the window's limpidity. The paint starts to obstruct the view of anything other than paint, restricting vision. Although I am using paint as an illustration in this case, the same condition applies to any medium in any context. Rough and direct handling of material become a frost on the window, so to speak, and frustrates the communication of any idea but that of frost.

For better or worse, this is an epoch in which the direct handling of material is a signifier: it symbolizes the presence of Art-wtih-a-capital-A. In the mid-ninteenth century all fine art was carefully crafted, to the exclusion of all other manners of manipulating paint, stone, or clay. One of the great contributions of Impressionism and later movements was to liberate art from the academic prejudice that gesture and accidental effects were not the proper realm of art. Of course the transition was not smooth. Recall the heated protest stimulated by Matisse's portrait of his wife with the green strip on her nose: he was called a wild beast and

accused of shaking the very foundation of Western civilization. But now the visual arts community has grown accustomed to drips and splatters and scrapes. In fact, such markings often lend a vital energy to painting and sculpture, and without the notion of accident and aleatory occurrence, twentieth century art would be much the poorer. The present condition is in some ways the inverse of the situation a century ago, though. Those artists who don't exploit splash and dash are suspect, while masters of the rude and crude like Julian Schnabel and George Baselitz are elevated to the status of cultural icons. The academy has certified the uncareful handling of material: we can be reasonably sure we're looking at art if it's covered with marks and drips and slashes. Artists who insist on the unobscured window must labor without those convenient signs.

Perhaps every artist who relies on careful facture is an imagist: the object itself is an image. They are making likenesses of something imagined. The emphasis here is not on concept or content as much as on the replication of a mental construct. The construct is not exactly an abstraction, but something the artist sees in her mind and then attempts to reconstruct in physical form. The resulting object can be viewed as a feature of the imagination made real; but the degree to which the object is convincing depends entirely on how clear the window is. The artist is populating the world with features of her interior landscape, but she doesn't want to confuse the representation with anything less than a precise rendering of the original vision.

I am constantly struck by the way fine craftsmen demand their work to be "just so", and spend hours and days adjusting the object until it satisfies some unstated criterion. This fussing and reworking is usually understood as the usual price of fine craftsmanship, and for many artisans it is nothing more than meeting an external, objective standard of function and finish. But a true artist in the crafts has an entirely different purpose in mind - he is attempting to conform the physical object to the image in his mind's eye. A purpose of meticulous making is clarity.

Here is a type of art that has no name. It is not surrealism, because it does not claim to explore the unconscious. These are not Dali's "hand-painted dream photographs". They are too conscious, too worked-over, to celebrate the psychotic. Instead, this type of art investigates the quirky and highly individual territory of the imagination.

Recall that the current ideas making news in New York are about appropriation, the impossibility of authenticity, the manipulation of the population by communications media, and so on. All these concepts are used to justify and elevate current art, but none of them

address the wonderful ability of the human animal to imagine a reality that does not yet exist. Any notion of the creative nature of the visual arts is not getting much airplay because the hot topics are focussed elsewhere. While a fashionable young New York artist may be engaged in some intriguing philosophical debate, the ideas he entertains do little to examine or manifest imagination.

In fact, some recent concepts undermine the notion of creativity. Appropriation posts a version of art where every part comes from somewhere else, and the artist's choice is manifested only in the prototype to be copied. Perhaps because creativity has so long been associated with the visual arts, critics and artists have gotten a little tired of the word. Perhaps, in tune with the mod of fey futility that seems to characterize the art press these days, nobody believes that true creativity is even possible. Perhaps it's just too unsophisticated to be mentioned.

But careful craftsmanship can be wedded to creativity, even believe in it passionately. If a precisely rendered object is actually a clear representation of a mental image, then the imagination justifies the whole enterprise. For the artists in this exhibition, imagination is the sacrament. The mental image that guides and motivates their production is a potent force: how else to explain the time and trouble necessary to produce the objects seen here? Their craftsmanship is not mindless and selfserving, but is entirely dependent on a passionate faith in the value of imagination.

I suspect that these artistxs deeply believe in one of the primal functions of art: it is a vessel for the originative powers of the human mind. Aside from doubts raised as to the impossibility of unique and free invention, and aside from claims that all humans are no more than slaves to their environment, these people believe in the imagination. They must feel a kinship to all the astonishing creations in the world history of art; they must recognize the power of every great artist to dream up something new and then make it. They are in love with the idea of making something where nothing was before. Above all, they have a tremendous faith in the human ability to envision. As it justifies their labor, it must also justify their lives.

In the end, this passionate belief is a profoundly optimistic vision of human existence. Because the careful shaping of a mental construct demands such discipline, it implies a vivid faith. It posits craft and creativity as redeeming and justifying qualities in our lives. While admitting to the difficulty and humility of individual endeavor, and while not claiming to be

able to change the world, this belief suggests that life is worth it after all. In a word, this faith and its resultant work is hopeful.