

Author's note: This article was first published in the February/March 1993 issue of *American Craft* magazine. It was the culmination of an extended effort to disentangle craft from Modernist formalism. For several decades, ambitious craftspeople had tried to trim crafts to fit into a formalist pigeonhole, and I found myself more and more annoyed. "Replacing the Myth of Modernism" was my effort to sort through the problem. While many of my remarks are now dated, and formalism is no longer the dominating force it once was, I believe the central analysis remains sound.

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There's a movement afoot to declare that the conflict between art and craft is dead, that the struggle has been won, that craft *is* art. We can all congratulate ourselves and go home happy. But art has its own rules, and its own language, which make implicit claims to dominance over all other codes. If you want to join the club, you have to speak, act, and think like the club members, and they are not particularly interested in being challenged. If craft wants entry into the temple of art, it had better change its clothes--and be very polite.

The thesis of this article is simple: craftspeople should stop trying to make modern art. Assimilation into art is deadly to craft, and should be avoided. After 20 years of observation and a dozen years of teaching, I believe that there are important distinctions between craft and art. The clearest evidence I can point to is that when craftsmen and sculptors make sculpture, the results are different. Craft-based sculpture tends to be more

decorative, more richly visual, more respectful of material and process, but also less cognizant of the history of sculpture and art world issues. I can only conclude that craft constitutes a different class of objects and also springs from a different set of values and a separate historical consciousness. These differences are essential to craft, and they are in peril of being lost.

In its broadest outline, art in the Western world is characterized by limitlessness. Since Duchamp's urinal, art is constituted by the authority of the artist. If a convincing argument is made, the thing he names or points to is newly understood as art. Duchamp pointed at the urinal and the bottle rack, and they became art. Joseph Beuys painted his face gold, walked around a gallery explaining paintings to a dead rabbit in his arms, and it was art. Warhol filmed the Empire State Building for eight hours straight, and that was art, too. *Anything* can be art in this intellectual climate, and such permissiveness is not necessarily bad. The limitlessness of art acts as a metaphor for freedom, disturbing or frightening as that may be. But not anything can be craft.

Craft -- the kind of craft this magazine is devoted to -- is defined by four simultaneous identities. First, craft is usually made substantially by hand. This is the primary root of all craft, the wellspring and reference point for everything else in the field. Additionally, craft is characterized by references to three traditions that evolved before the advent of mass-production. Craft is medium-specific: it is always identified with a material and the technologies invented to manipulate it. For instance, ceramics can be defined as the use of clay and proficiency in skills like throwing or handbuilding. Woodworking, metalsmithing, weaving, and glassblowing are all disciplines specific to a medium and its

mastery. These materials are only incidentally industrial; most have been used since the beginnings of civilization and many of the skills are equally ancient. The preindustrial roots and traditional mediums specificity of craft create a number of gray areas: is neon sign-making a craft? Is machining on a lathe?

Third, craft is defined by use. Craft disciplines are traditional groupings of functions—jewelry, furniture or clothing, for example – with irregular boundaries and no direct correspondence to material. Jewelry refers to objects used to adorn the body, furniture consists of movable objects used for domestic purposes like sitting or storing goods, and so on. None of these categories specifies a material, however. So, even the narrowest Eurocentric jewelry tradition can include glass, ceramic ( as faience ), coal ( as jet ), even human hair ( in memorial lockets )—a greater range than the precious metal and gemstones that conservative practitioners claim as the exclusive and proper material for jewelry. Similarly, furniture and clothing are all made of wide varieties of materials. Most of these functions were established under preindustrial conditions. While our idea of furniture has accommodated uses not even dreamed of fifty years ago, like computer tables and television stands, the sphere of craft does not include manufactured objects like small appliances, airplanes, or telephone equipment.

Craft is also defined by its past. Each of the craft disciplines has a multicultural history that is recorded mostly as objects, many from societies that have long since disappeared. The history of each craft is far richer and older than that of painting, in spite of the way art history has been taught. A huge body of objects serve as an enormous reference library for craftsmen.

Thus, craft is a series of limitations suggested by tradition. By nature, craft looks backwards, which is no longer supposed to be a virtue. But all those ancient usages provide a sourcebook from which craft can clarify its essential distinction from fine art. Once that is done, craft can develop its own conceptual approach.

At present craft is sandwiched between two imposing neighbors. On one side are the mass-production technologies that have been superseding it for the last three centuries. The ongoing industrial revolution rendered most of the subsistence crafts obsolete. Pottery, yardage weaving, basketry, boatmaking and hundreds of other crafts became marginal. Others were killed off: carving figureheads, fabricating wooden coaches, or making hatboxes are among the many that have vanished. Craft production, once representing most of material culture, was replaced by manufactured goods.

Mass-production, in turn, stimulated the rise consumerism, which Edward Lucie-Smith defines as “the liberation of desire to own from strict claims of necessity”<sup>i</sup>. As factory-made objects flooded the marketplace to be purchased by a growing middle class, these items no longer had to serve the demands of survival: articles made strictly as decoration, once the exclusive property of the rich, became commonplace. Then, in a great irony of history, craft reentered the marketplace in response to consumerist values. Today, gifts and home furnishings constitute the most significant market for craft. No longer marginal, craft now competes in these markets on an even footing with industry.

The other neighbor of craft is modern art, along with its history and theory. Craft teachers and craft students—the majority of nonproduction craftsmen--have long envied the status enjoyed by modern art, as well as its financial rewards. This wistful desire for loftier status has created confusion, frustration, and guilt. The common strategy to achieve art's prestige has been to adopt the style of any recently certified art movement, from Abstract Expressionism to performance art. Yet, to perceive art as a parade of visual styles is an error, for modern art is principally an ongoing debate about the value and purpose of visual experience.

Where modern art is defined by theory, postwar craft has avoided it. Few critics have developed a career writing about craft alone, and even fewer ideas have emerged specifically from craft practice. Most writing in the field borrows ideas uncritically from painting and sculpture, without questioning how appropriate they are to a craft object. Most writers on craft assume that the language of art criticism fits craft like a comfortable old pair of pants, no alterations necessary. One has only to read the words “expression” or “concept” repeated ad nauseum in articles about craft to see how the myths of modern art are applied indiscriminately. How can a pot be expressive? How can an object be minimalist and decorative at the same time? Which concepts are appropriate to jewelry, and which are not? Such questions are rarely asked.

A pervasive anti-intellectual bias exists in the craft world. In books on craft, photographs dominate: two of the more recent surveys of twentieth century jewelry had a combined total of 51 pages of body text and 260 pages of photographs<sup>ii</sup>. The few monographs on established craftsmen read like extended publicity releases--seldom is heard a

discouraging word. Perhaps the know-nothing attitude is most nakedly revealed in this statement from jeweler and teacher David LaPlantz: “*Metalsmith* [magazine]...has been boring, uninteresting and filled with... pieces that once I read I did not understand or even care to understand. Actually, I have stopped reading *Metalsmith* and now just skim the pages for interesting images and advertising.”<sup>iii</sup> Such an attitude discourages critical thinking of any sort, and does not bode well for the future of crafts.

The paucity of thinking and writing on craft has led to a vacuum of both debate and standards. Teachers offer their students no clearly articulated direction; collectors and curators have no standards of quality to guide acquisitions; and the field lacks a distinct language to describe its own practice. The implication is that any craft object is as good as any other, and that quality is chiefly a matter of star status.

If craft claims to be art, it will have to examine its ends and means more closely. Even in the current atmosphere of freewheeling pluralism, craft will not be taken seriously until it can demonstrate genuine significance and relevance. Tom Wolfe in *The Painted Word* is right: nobody sees art unless it comes with a text. For better or worse, craft must develop its own theory about the meaning of handmade objects in this late industrial era. And the task must begin with understanding the theory that has thoroughly infiltrated contemporary craft: Modernism.

Modernist Theory: The Disinterested Gaze and the Autonomous Art Object

There is a distinction between modern art with a small *m* and Modernism with a capital. The term Modernism encompasses a group of ideas and the works that emanated from them. It is not a vague label for all the art made in the 20th century. The Modernist art object was made to support aesthetic contemplation, which was limited to a highly specialized set of conditions. While the decline of Modernism has been loudly proclaimed for the past 15 years, the status accorded to the fine art object has yet to be overthrown. Postmoderns might admire strategies like appropriation and social engagement, but they remain reluctant to admit a potter or a weaver into the Whitney Biennial. All the old prejudices remain intact, and those prejudices are inherent in the theories of Modernism. At the same time, the doctrine of formalism and the concept of autonomy--two of the keys of Modernist theory--are taken as basic assumptions by many of the most respected craft practitioners. Ironically, contemporary craft is one of the last bastions of faith in Modernism.

Modernism emerged from the ashes of the First World War. The alienation that intellectuals felt from the self-destruction of European culture molded their ambitions for art and design. The new art was to be utopian. Proponents of Futurism, De Stijl, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus envisioned a new society which radically rejected the bourgeois values that supposedly caused the war. The new society would embrace machine production, it would be completely redesigned to be efficient, and it would be ruthlessly modern. To accomplish all this revision, the modernist had to cut himself off from the past, from all but one tradition. More than anything else, the new world would be *rational*, and in that respect, Modernism is firmly anchored in the mainstream of Western philosophy and aesthetics.

While Modernism is not a single, unified narrative, some critics insist that it still presents the most cogent theory of art, mostly because all the others are even less rational.

Modernism is part of a search for transcendent absolutes and precisely delineated categories. Modernism is also regarded by many as a series of claims that constitute an ideology, that is (in Feminist terms, for example), a narrative that empowers one group at the expense of another, while explaining that inequity as natural or logical.

The cornerstone of Modernist ideology is the idea of the autonomous art object. Here, the word “autonomous” describes a state of being self-contained, existing without reference or influence from anything else. The autonomous object was intended to do only one thing only--to support an aesthetic experience. This thinking is grounded in Western philosophy, in which art is distinguished from other categories of objects. Broadly, this desire for extreme clarity is a variety of essentialism: an effort to find the irreducible essence of a category of experience (or object). But there were insoluble problems with categorizing art objects as being distinct from all other classes of objects, so philosophers resorted to examining the experience of art instead. Again, the essentialist maneuver: The question What is the essence of the art object? was restated as What is not duplicated in any other type of experience? Western aesthetics thus became a process of exclusion. The separation was completed by the notion that art creates a special experience like no other. If an observer had an aesthetic experience, he must be in the presence of art.

In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant declared that the aesthetic experience could occur only when the observer had a “disinterested” attitude. He did not suggest that viewers should not be attentive and emotionally open, but that they should not expect any type of profit or self-improvement from the experience. Artworks had to be savored only for the pleasure of beauty, and experiencing art must be entirely self-rewarding. An attitude of mind that looked for artwork to be good for any other purpose diverted attention away from the art, and toward this other “good”, which Kant declared was outside the aesthetic experience. Any aspect of an artwork which spoke to an ulterior motive was not concerned with beauty, and thus was disqualified from causing an aesthetic experience. Using a similar logic of exclusion, Kant also rejected sensory pleasure and emotional appeal from the realm of the aesthetic. Art could only be good for being art.

The idea of disinterestedness distinguishes between a non-aesthetic “content” and the formal means of aesthetic contemplation. As Harold Osborne, an enthusiast of high Modernism, explains in his introductory text, *Aesthetics and Art Theory*:

“We may appreciate works of art as vehicles for nonaesthetic values--moral, social, religious, intellectual, and others; and the experience will be the richer for it. But if we respond directly to those other values (so the doctrine of disinterestedness or psychological distance maintains ), we are not appreciating the object aesthetically as a work of art. In artistic contacts, so long as they remain in the aesthetic sphere, there must necessarily be restraint from full commitment to the urgencies and values of ordinary life.” And Osborne continues: “All these attitudes and emotions are foreign to aesthetic

contemplation (although they may of course enter into the content of a work of art toward which we take up the aesthetic attitude of attention ).<sup>iv</sup>

The disinterested attitude mandates that any component of experience that appeals to “the urgencies and values of ordinary life” is not properly aesthetic. This is the logic that excludes craft from the realm of art. According to this theory, using a bowl to eat your oatmeal is not, in itself, an aesthetic experience. Expecting any gain--in this case, nourishment--puts the viewer in a frame of mind in which an aesthetic experience, by definition, cannot be encountered. You would have to stop using the bowl before you could perceive it aesthetically. Any type of use, any religious content, any political propaganda or critique, any commentary on the real world--all were held to be incapable of supporting a true aesthetic experience.

Kant admitted that aesthetic judgments are subjective: they can't be proven to be true or false but are ultimately based in the viewer's state of feeling. There is no measurement in aesthetic judgments, none of the objectivity of science or mathematics. On the other hand, Kant could not admit that aesthetic pleasure might be completely relativistic, residing strictly in the taste of each individual. To claim that “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” would place the aesthetic experience outside the purview of philosophy, and demote aesthetic judgment to the same status as raw emotion. This was clearly unacceptable.

So Kant performed a nifty trick. Since aesthetic attention is possible only in a state of disinterest, where no trace of personal desire remains, Kant asserted that every true judgment of beauty contains an implicit claim to universal validity. That is, a person in a state of total disinterestedness is actually operating in a free state of cognition that does not vary from person to person. Kant was claiming that a disinterested attitude is identical in all individuals and all cultures, and is inherent to human nature. Kant called this, of all things, “common sense.” The aesthetic experience was thus defined as occupying a middle ground between objectivity and subjectivity--between the cool distance of scientific observation and the messy heat of human emotion. Furthermore, the aesthetic experience, being a special type of cognition, was universal.

This marvelous mental sleight of hand is Modernism’s chief claim to authority. Kant’s “common sense” cannot be tested—it is not measurable--but it claims to be identical for every sensitive person, regardless of sex, education, class, or cultural background. ( In contrast, anthropological research suggests that very few visual experiences are understood the same way in every known culture, and might be limited to the smile, the scowl of anger, and the frown of anxiety, and a few other primeval facial expressions of emotion.) Untestable truth is a powerful intellectual weapon. It’s no wonder that most Modernists accepted Kant’s logic at face value.

In Modernist ideology, only one kind of visual phenomena supports the aesthetic experience--the formal elements of art. Color, line, plane, mass and void, composition cannot speak to self-interest, and thus qualify as able to stimulate valid aesthetic experiences. Only the formal elements of art qualify for universality. This is the doctrine

of “formalism,” and it explains why abstraction--color and form disconnected from content--became the most significant mode of art-making by the mid-20th century.

Abstraction satisfied all the demands of Kantian theory.

Art devoid of content, utilizing only formal elements, was said to be “autonomous.” That is, it was designed solely to create an aesthetic experience, and therefore became a stand-alone phenomenon, disconnected in every other way from the rest of the world. To some critics, autonomy became a necessary precondition for an object to be called modern art. Pure art for art’s sake, art about art and nothing else. No use, no meaning, no impurity, no messy world to intrude.

Several corollaries follow from the logic of autonomy. First, any object embedded in tradition, or made for physical use, is art only to the degree to which tradition and use can be ignored, and the work’s formal qualities attended to instead. Second, it was held that these formal qualities, by stimulating an aesthetic experience, could cause the viewer to “transcend” immediate material existence. The metaphysical place one transcended to was never specified, but it was usually located either in Plato’s domain of pure absolutes, or in a moment of superior, refined pleasure. The term “transcendence” is a Modernist buzzword intended to argue for the philosophical and moral superiority of the autonomous art object.

And so, the ideology of high Modernism is complete.

Ultimately, Modernism redefined art. Once its assumptions are accepted, it follows that valid art *must* be autonomous. Anything else--the craftiness of craft, the social and

psychological uses of an object, the meanings that people project upon the things they love--does not fall within the realm of art. And if it's not art, according to the rules of Modernism, it cannot cause an aesthetic experience, it's not worth looking at seriously, and it's not really worth doing.

Modernist theory established the look and feel of credible art, a look that was immediately legible, if poorly understood. And craft--especially craft rooted in traditions of skill, material, function, and history--did not have the proper look and feel. As Clement Greenberg, the foremost spokesman for high Modernism, often intoned, "Craft is not art."<sup>v</sup>

#### Damage Done: Modernism's Effect on Craft

Craftsmen have long wished for the privileges of modern art: clean, white galleries; those museum collections; amazing prices. Once craft practitioners were relegated to non-artist status by Modernist ideology, it was not surprising that they would envy the prestige that art commanded. They concluded that the perks were awarded for the condition of autonomy: standing apart from the world and serving no other function than to be regarded.

Status-hungry craftsmen treated the theory of autonomy like a new religion, accepting its claim to authority uncritically and never examining its supporting logic. The two fundamentals of Modernist theory--the autonomous art object and the language of formalism--were perceived as basic elements of fine art, and craft adopted them for the

sake of credibility. Instead of making decorative or functional objects, or exploiting other traditional craft contexts, craftsmen tried to make modern sculpture. In attempting to assert equal status by adopting Modernist rules, craftsmen revealed their “cultural cringe”--an implicit sense of inferiority about the traditional roles of craft.

Most frequently than not, “star-quality” crafts are autonomous objects made from craft media. Harvey Littleton’s glass, Bill Daley’s ceramics, Heikki Seppa’s metalsmithing and thousands of other objects closely follow Modernist prescriptions. The many social implications of craft have been amputated without ceremony. Elements of design, material, and technology are attended to visually without concern for social meanings. Littleton manipulates form and void in space, as if he were Henry Moore in miniature. The properties of glass--transparency, reflection, and refraction--are the only remaining craft content in Littleton’s work. Daley concerns himself with the tension between inside and outside of the ceramic vessel, a focus that falls neatly inside the boundaries dictated by formalist principles. Seppa makes bizarre abstract forms in space. Otherwise, there is no content at all, exactly as the theory of autonomy prescribes. Apparently these craftsman have not examined the reason for making craft jump through the hoop of autonomy. Theory became myth, and craftspeople obediently believe. Either unfamiliar with or dismissive of the logic of the disinterested aesthetic experience, they try to make their work look like autonomous art. Modernism is taken as a style rather than an idea. The result of such superficial mining is a widespread confusion, because the essential characteristics of craft are denied.

In trying to make autonomous art objects, craftsmen enshrine uselessness. The nonfunctional object has become the standard of achievement, especially in ceramics, glass and fiber. No one questions the logic of making a formalist sculpture out of craft media, because nobody questions the logic of autonomy in the first place. In a bid to gain respect, otherwise sensible craft practitioners call their work fiber art, art furniture and art jewelry, as if the terms weaving and furniture and jewelry lacked dignity. Only a few of these aspiring artists, however, have had the courage to simply call their work “sculpture” and leave the unthreatening arena of crafts.

Another legacy of Modernism is a distrust of skill and fine craftsmanship. The history of modern art records a gradual abandonment of the traditional crafts of painting and carving, partly as a symbolic rejection of academic taste and, ultimately, of bourgeois culture. By the late 1940's, Jackson Pollack could pour house paint on a canvas, throw his cigarette butts onto it, and be heralded as the hero of American painting. The uncrafted gesture now stands for authenticity and raw emotion, and has, ironically, been converted into dogma in university art departments. It becomes increasingly difficult for teachers to insist on control and discipline because they would seem to be arguing against the apotheosis of American art: Abstract Expressionism.

Craft has embraced other Modernist assertions: the insistence on rupture from the past; the celebration of newness and rejection of the familiar; stress on originality; the silly military metaphor of the avant-garde. Another of Modernism's insidious influences on craft is the implication that innovation and originality can be realized most effectively outside of craft traditions. The most art-aspiring among craftsmen reject all the traditional

strengths of handcraft: pride in skill and craftsmanship; utility; familiar shapes refined in centuries of production; and social and psychological applications.

When craft is forced to aspire to a condition of autonomy, several unresolved problems develop. The theories of autonomy are questionable at best, and are no longer as persuasive as they used to be. To accept autonomy as a necessary precondition for craft, the craftsman must agree with a system that denies aesthetic value to the very things that make craft distinct. If he transforms the craft object into autonomous art, he denies the ways that craft relates to real life. He is then left with “art-guilt” about making *merely* a pot, a chair, a knife, a coat, or an engagement ring. Those simple objects are no longer enough like art.

### Critiques of Modernist Theory

Modernist theories do not stand uncontested. Several schools of thought, including Marxism, Feminism, and the study of material culture, contend that autonomy is an illusion and that artwork is inevitably entangled with the larger world. Those holding such views point to a broad sphere of political, economic, sexual, and psychological meanings that sometimes constitute the true value and meaning of the artwork, and which the doctrine of autonomy only serves to camouflage. I refer to these many connections as “contingencies,” and for the purposes of this discussion, I will show how craft is contingent to the larger world. While Modernist theory acknowledges that such implications are present in the artwork (recall that Osborne called them “content”), they

are denied aesthetic status. Recent criticism challenges this restrictive distinction and suggests that contingencies can have aesthetic value.

To illustrate a negative example of contingency and to show the way that claims to high-minded aesthetics can obscure actual social content, I like to choose an easy target: Alexandre Cabanel's *La Naissance de Vénus* (*The Birth of Venus*), 1863. Cabanel depicts the nude, newborn Venus lounging on the surface of a wave, representing the ideal of feminine beauty. The concept of ideal beauty, which referred to classical Greek statuary, justified the painting to its viewers in the mid-19th century Paris Salon. But to our eyes, something else is going on. The depiction of a nude woman, posed with her pubic region centered in the composition to imply her sexual availability, now appears to be offensively sexist. What was originally conceived as the essence of a sensual, modeled object is now understood as soft pornography--the submissive female available to the owner of the painting. Such bad taste would be challenged by most serious critics and curators today. While not abstract and thus not the product of Modernist theories of autonomy, the painting offers an instructive case of how the subtext may be the genuine subject of an artwork, and how the aesthetic theory can disguise nasty realities.

The New York School paintings that Clement Greenberg touted as superior autonomous art, designed exclusively for sustained aesthetic contemplation, had their dirty little secrets, too. First, they were shown for sale in galleries, immediately becoming commodity objects. In fact, they became resoundingly successful as investments, and some of those heroically disinterested objects made millions for their owners. Second, they were quickly deployed by the United States government as propaganda to

demonstrate the cultural superiority of capitalism over communism. In the same exposition that featured the famous “kitchen debate” between Nixon and Khrushchev, the United States exhibited a group of Abstract Expressionist paintings, the implication being that the American economic system was responsible for the best new painting in the world.<sup>vi</sup> And last, feminists have pointed out that the female Abstract Expressionists like Lee Krasner and Elaine De Kooning were every bit as innovative as the men, but were accorded fame and fortune only decades later. How could a truly disinterested critic, feminists ask, discern the sex of the artist? They conclude that dealers and critics invoked supposedly impersonal standards, buttressed by theories of autonomy, to disguise a very different intent: to lionize men and marginalize women.

It’s now obvious that Modernist paintings were caught up in social practice. Post-modernists, going one step further, claim that the ideal of total disinterestedness is an illusion. Art became successful commodities, tools for propaganda, and vehicles for sexist behavior, roles that intrude into the clean, dispassionate aesthetic space that Modernists claimed. Indeed, once these external factors are recognized, an informed viewer can’t forget them. The knowledge disrupts disinterestedness. A few diehard Modernists continue to insist that one can look at a Pollack painting and forget how famous he was, how expensive the painting is, and how the artist once pissed into Peggy Guggenheim’s fireplace. But the proposition that one can willfully disregard all knowledge in the contemplation of art is not taken seriously anymore. Such monumental forgetting isn’t credible. The idea of disinterestedness that underlies the theory of autonomy has been undermined, and all of aesthetics are left open to revision.

The notion that art is necessarily contingent is not new. Marxism insists that art emerges from the larger society, particularly from economic conditions. In this view, art is regarded as “instrumental,” a tool for a social agenda. Art becomes a vehicle for purposes that high Modernism excluded, and the criteria for aesthetic success shifts: art can be judged by the efficiency with which it achieves its goal and the nobility of the goal itself. Generally, instrumental art takes social change as the most desirable outcome. Of course, most Marxists insisted that Communism was the only suitable goal, and the proletariat, the only suitable audience for art. Because art under Communist regimes was usually restricted to serving repressive governments, theories of instrumentality are not greatly respected in the United States.

A more American version of contingency emerged from Feminism. The civil rights movement and protests against the Vietnam war suggested that, contrary to the doctrine of disinterestedness, social criticism in art was both possible and necessary. A small group of artists called for direct action against social ills, and the call was answered by women who felt that truly female visual art was being suppressed. Early feminist artists like Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro pointed out that the art world ignored injustices--particularly discrimination against women --because the discourse of autonomy diverted attention from the social aspects of art. Despite Modernism’s roots in revolution and imaginary utopias, feminists claimed that Modernism of the 1950s and 60s passively accepted corruption and inequities of power. In opposition, they proposed an art that referred to life, and actively sought to restore dignity to women’s lives. Furthermore, feminists proposed that their activist art was aesthetically valid. In a sense, they sought a middle ground between formalism and instrumentality. A monument to these attempts to

revise art theory is Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, one of the most ambitious craft objects produced in this century.

While the doctrines of autonomy might be discredited, they continue as a powerful mythology. Standing in opposition to Modernism are theories of instrumentality and contingency, which stress art's relationship to the world. There are conflicts between the two approaches. Modernism posits the metaphysics of transcendent absolutes, of clean theoretical perfection, and art as a self-rewarding, self-referential activity. Contingency presupposes life-as-lived, knotty problems of cultural difference, art as caught up in social practice. An aesthetic war follows: between Modernist abstraction and social realism; between defenders of the established order and radical political critics; between formalism and decoration; between art and craft.

### Craft as Contingent Artform

The idea of contingency can help us focus on ways that craft is enmeshed in the processes of living, not separated from them by aesthetic distance. My thesis is that craft is inherently a contingent artform, and its aesthetic value must be located in ways craft is intimate, useful and meaningful. Craft should not presuppose disinterestedness in order to justify itself. Efforts to dispense with contingency also dispense with craft, until all that's left is attractive, timid, mediocre sculpture.

Again, I choose an easy target: Harvey Littleton, a founding father of studio glass. In his loops and arcs, widely held to be a pinnacle of craft accomplishment, all the rich social

resonance of traditional craft has been carefully edited out. Any “craftness” that survives resides in the material and its manipulation, and nothing else. What remains is a slick, facile sculpture that follows the theoretical confines of the autonomous art object. Conceptually, the object is empty: the difficult groundwork of abstract sculpture was prepared long before by the Constructivists, Henry Moore, David Smith, and others. Littleton lets them take his risks. His sculpture is made with a repertoire of proven techniques like casing transparent colors, bending, and slicing. None of the adventure and variation of form that makes Moore or Smith so interesting remains. Littleton makes autonomous art objects disguised as craft, and he exploits the glow of artistic credibility that 1950s art theory reflects on his work. He reduces Modernism to a limp formula, and he has been wildly successful in the marketplace.

Craft must avoid such easy imitations of Modernism. If it wants to build a conceptual foundation and distinguish itself from the other arts, it must turn away from Modernist aesthetics and begin to examine the ways in which its practices are contingent to social life. Craft objects can stand back and offer commentary, propose reforms, advocate traditions, or simply try to help people get by. But craftspeople can no longer afford to produce objects that do nothing but sit on a pedestal and look pretty. If that practice continues, the ultimate price of will be the reduction of craft to a poverty-stricken colony of the art world.

We in craft must start by examining the varieties of contingency and discovering meaning within them. These may have little to do with art ( as defined by both Modernism and Postmodernism ), but they are often the traditional roles of craft. Craft

theory must look not to art, but to craft, and how craft refuses to conform to art theory. In fact, the project of reconstructing the meaning of craft will culminate in rewriting Western aesthetics, ultimately forcing the “art” category to become more tolerant and inclusive.

Craft is defined by tradition, after all. Where Modernism stipulated a rupture between present and past, craft proposes a seamless continuity. Craft looks to the past for techniques, visual cues, meanings and ideas. Even today, craft depends on the continuous revival of preindustrial technologies. Most craft practitioners reenact a process that has been in use for thousands of years, whether it is throwing on the potter’s wheel, hammering a sheet of metal into a hollow form, spinning and weaving fiber, or blowing glass. Craftsmen also look to historical production for reference and inspiration, the way that Bernard Leach held Southern Sung Dynasty pottery to be a paradigm of excellence, or the way that jewelers now look at African and Oceanic body adornment as a source of vigorous, wearable form. Historicism and eclecticism were standard practices in the crafts long before Postmodernism provided a theoretical justification.

This open relationship to tradition rejects modernity as an absolute value and denies the claim of early Modernists that art must reflect only the most recent conditions. The Futurist romance with urbanism and high technology is rarely reenacted in the crafts. Modernism’s flaw was to demand an entirely new world, filled with new art, architecture, and mass-produced design based on formalism and functionalism, while arrogantly ignoring the human need for rootedness. By contrast, craft looks at society as a continuum, not a new invention. A firm connection to the past is both possible and

desirable. This stark difference from the stance of Modernism is occasionally asserted, but rarely examined. To affirm the value of tradition suggests a view of society in which the familiar is recognized and valued, not rejected out-of-hand. To craft, tradition is not necessarily backward, corrupt, or a restraining force in civilization; it is not an anchor, but a rudder.

The contest between innovation and tradition illuminates a larger question about craft's relation to society. Modern art positioned itself as an adversary to mass culture, struggling to maintain the lamp of true enlightenment against the darkness of ignorant, bourgeois society. Modernists assumed the mantle of leadership, but they held their audience in contempt (read Greenberg's early writings, like *The Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, 1939, for evidence.) Almost as an antithesis to Modernism, craft offers no radical critique of bourgeois culture or capitalist economy, and not since the days of William Morris has it claimed the moral authority to build a utopia. Generally, craft is an advocate, not an adversary. The bourgeoisie are seen as a marketplace, not a class of criminals. Craft adheres to a middle-class view of the middle-class, acknowledging bourgeois taste as a marketing parameter, and recognizing capitalism as a cultural given. Service and acceptance, not agitation and criticism, are central to the ethos of craft.

Typically, craft objects are accessible, fitting comfortably into life-as-lived, rather than interrogating or challenging it. Craft usually observes humanistic practices: self-employment in low-impact capitalist businesses, modest incomes, ecological preservation, dignity through honest labor. Pointed commentary is not foreign to craft—the ceramists Howard Kottler and Michael Frimkess, or the jeweler J. Fred Woell are

well known as social critics--but its stance is more that of a loyal opposition, unlike early Modernism's alignment with Marxist revolution, or with T. S. Eliot's sour metaphor of modern life as a wasteland.

The strong Marxist influence on art criticism leads many writers to dismiss crafts as being hopelessly uncritical.<sup>vii</sup> Such views naively assume that the supportive role of craft is less dignified and important than the adversarial role of some fine art. Most of the Marxist governments have been overthrown; one can only wait for the dimwitted prejudice against the "working-within-the-system" stance of craft will undergo the same fate.

### Anonymity and Identity

Craft retains one crucial oppositional stance. The hand-made object is widely understood as the antithesis of mass-produced anonymity, and offers the middle class one of its few defenses against the early Modernist's authoritarian dream of total design.<sup>viii</sup> Combining ideas of universal form, standardization, elimination of decoration, rejection of historical prototypes, and the enthusiastic embrace of the machine age, Modernist design theorists largely ignored cultural differences and the perplexing psychology of subjectivity. At no point did theory account for personal experience or the need for self-identity. The utopia envisioned by Corbusier and Gropius turned out to be sterile, boring, and devoid of comforting symbolism. For the past 30 years, it has become increasingly obvious that objects designed according to "rational" standards precipitated a mass identity crisis: people could not relate to their environments. Alienation inevitably followed. The abject

failure of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis is only the most conspicuous example of the dismal record of Modernist reform.

Modernism once proposed a brave new world of unified design and high-tech manufacture but craft resists. Craft objects reinforce personal identity. American consumers intuitively read the uniqueness of the handmade object as a tangible analogue to their own singularity: the marks of hand fabrication symbolize the uniqueness of an individual life. Subtle variations of handmade form and the textures of handmade surfaces resist simulation, and thus cannot be incorporated into the vocabulary of industrial design. Glaze effects, the irregularities of handweaving, or hammer marks on a planished bowl all become fingerprints in an otherwise perfect environment. These glitches and blips, inevitable by-products of preindustrial technologies, not only become antidotes to sameness and predictability of mass-produced objects, but they return visual complexity and a sense of the individual's connection to the home. People use handmade pottery, weaving, jewelry, and even macramé to prove they're not just another number. Craft has been enlisted in an intuitive rebellion against the "improvements" of Modernism, and this is why the market for it has exploded in the last three decades.

For the middle class, the symbolism of uniqueness takes place in the margin between too much sameness and too much difference. Too much weirdness indicates poor socialization and solicits rejection, as anyone who has ever worn a Mohawk haircut to a job interview can confirm. Crafts that are different enough from mass-production but related to the traditions of Western decorative arts are most often used to stave off the

anxiety of anonymity. The familiarity of craft forms complements the uniqueness of hand production.

Made for a particular person and occasion, a craft object like an engagement ring can serve as a specialized symbol. A generically designed, mass-produced, and nationally distributed ring cannot carry the same meaning, because the consumer knows that hundreds or thousands of identical rings are given and received. As a consequence, handmade objects are often used to mark important milestones: births, comings-of-age, marriages, anniversaries, deaths. Not surprisingly, in this country, crafts are used as gifts much more frequently than as necessities.

#### Social and Psychological Function: Meaning and Use

In Modernist theory, function was defined as limited to physical use. The study of the function of any useful object could then be treated as a quasi-science, measuring the human body and its parameters of movement. One could objectively study how a chair supports the human body, or how a teapot holds and pours tea. But defining function in this manner deflects attention away from the possibility of meaning. Entranced by formal principles of composition, new industrial materials and the study of ergonomics, designers forgot that people also require meaning and tradition. Indeed, the early Modernists consciously tried to erase all meaning from design--with the possible exception of symbols for progress and utopian socialism.

To contrast the difference between the objective stance of Modernism and the more traditional attitude that sees an object as a vehicle for meaning, imagine a comparison between a Bauhaus teapot and an elephant mask from the Bamikélé chiefdoms in Cameroon. The teapot, made to appear as if it was produced by machine, consists of carefully composed geometric forms. Each part of the design serves a physical function--spout, insulating handles, lid, body of the container--as well as satisfying the demands of formalist aesthetics. It symbolizes nothing of the past; in fact, it stands for the absolute break with tradition that Modernism specified. It was supposed to read as a rational, mechanical icon of the new age, and nothing more.

The elephant mask is not an abstract sculpture. It is worn every two years at the meetings of societies associated with the Bamikélé ruling council, or upon the death of the ruler, called the *fon*. When the mask is seen, it means an important ritual is taking place. The mask can be worn by members of only two societies out of eight, so it is exclusive. The image of the elephant symbolizes power, representing both the animal and the *fon*. Further, the elaborate beadwork represents wealth, power, and prestige: the glass beads are ancient barter money. The function, to mark a ritual, is overlaid with multiple and simultaneous meanings based on honored tradition. To apply ergonomics here would be absurd, and to demand a radical rupture from the past would be destructive.

In the United States, most ceremonial and ritual objects have fallen into disuse, but not all are obsolete. Within the craft traditions of metalwork are marriage rings, baby's spoons, Catholic chalices, patens and monstrances, Judaic kiddish cups and menorahs, gold watches for retirements. In each case, the physical function is joined to widely

understood social meaning. The object communicates through a social code, learned like a language by members of the culture that produced it.

Enchanted by the spell of Modernism, “artistic” temperaments today usually believe ritual and ceremonial objects are too tradition-bound to be suitable vehicles for self-expression. But self-expression needn’t be the highest goal of the craft practitioner. In a secular world, craft can serve others by offering a medium for personal meaning--a receptive screen upon which to project significance. Instead of conveying total self-absorption in expression, a craft object can perform a service. Instead of celebrating the artist’s ego, the work can discover the unanswered needs of the user. Craftspeople can move into areas of subject matter that art and design have declared to be irrelevant for almost a century, and in so doing, they can actually become socially responsible.

Americans today are starved for authentic meaning. Status symbols and TV images fail to satisfy a growing number of people. One manifestation is the explosion in popularity of body piercing and tattoos, which many of young see as an uncontaminated emblem of rejection of the mainstream, and a voluntary embrace of outsider status. The permanence of the tattoo underlines its authenticity. Surely, such drastic alterations must be motivated by a genuine hunger, and while they might seem extreme, the point is that many psychological needs are not answered either by mass-market design or by fine art. It remains for the craftsman to become a scholar of the niche market, to discover vacuums of meaning (and they are many), to study them carefully, and then make objects that contain--or can take on-- appropriate meanings.

The site for most of this meaningful work is not in the gallery or the museum, but the body and the home. The meaning of craft operates in humble places, but it's as site-specific as a Richard Serra sculpture. The coded language of craft speaks from the body--with jewelry and clothing--and the home--with furniture, pottery, fabric, lighting, and decoration. Once the craft object is isolated on a pedestal, like autonomous art, it loses most of its power to be invested with an intimate and ongoing personal meaning.

Redirecting the ambition of craft from galleries to homes does not mean that craft objects must necessarily be less profound or less satisfying than modern art--they merely serve a different agenda. Of course, to suggest that a simple pot may be as good as your standard art masterpiece is profoundly subversive. What would happen if we had to take all those pots seriously? Museums would be required to go to craft fairs, buy pots and weavings and jewelry, and place them next to those expensive paintings. The canon would have to be rewritten, and hordes of craftspeople admitted into the temple of art. But most revolutionary of all would be the notion that good art could be widely available and cheap--40 dollars (or less!) could get you into the elite. Of course, few mandarins of culture would be likely to allow it.

Unfortunately, most contemporary craft practitioners do not consciously address social and private meaning. Discourse about function is directed toward physical use, exactly as Modernism dictates. Craftspeople who wish to claim the more exalted position of "artist" are distracted by the foolish idea that the functionless object is innately superior. The possibilities of craft serving psychological uses goes uninvestigated. This is sad--a betrayal and a loss.

### Craft and Conditions of Production

The basic concepts of Modernism--disinterestedness, formalism, the autonomy of art--specifically address the way that a person is supposed to look at art. The conditions surrounding the making of art are not given much attention. Such matters as how the artist thinks and feels, and how society influences the artist, get swept under the rug. While expressionist theory examines the emotional life of the artist, Marxism offers a slant on economic factors, and feminism analyzes power relations between the sexes, the complex network of social impact on personal experience is largely ignored. Most critics have assumed that craft is uncritical,<sup>ix</sup> so they never imagine that craft represents a collective, intuitive reaction to industrialization. When it comes to “conditions of production,” craft has profound implications.

The foundation of today’s crafts movement was laid by William Morris, the English reformer who saw how the handmade object could be made relevant in an industrialized society. To Morris, craftwork performed a social critique. It could counteract the degradation of factory labor, he claimed, if only English society would turn back the clock and return to a craft-based economy. Workers would take pride in their labor and at the same time be freed of capitalist exploitation. Objects in everyday life would become beautiful, informed by the loving touch of impassioned labor. Finally, art and craft would become unified. Of course, the theory did not work. Morris’s company and a few other workshops ultimately produced luxury goods for the wealthy, and industrialization proceeded undisturbed. Nonetheless, Morris was the first to imagine that preindustrial

technologies should be preserved for their social usefulness, and thousands of people followed his teachings. In the United States, Arts and Crafts Societies and some universities took up the cause to preserve craft skills. Enough institutions and teachers survived to germinate the post-World War II craft revival.

Today, craft in this country represents a collective response to social conditions, as well as an implicit social critique. Most craftsmen intuitively respond to hand labor, finding it satisfying and somehow fitting. Often, when people first take up a craft, they are surprised at the unpredictable and visceral nature of their feeling. As a teacher, I observed many times how directionless and unmotivated students come alive once they put their hands on metal, fiber, or clay. Unexpectedly, they find an activity that conforms to an innate sensibility and answers an unarticulated need. For some of these students—as happened with me--the craft becomes their life's work.

The choice to devote one's life to a craft is a conscious rejection of the way this society has devalued physical labor. Generally, Western societies are patterned after the classical Platonic hierarchy in which the mind, being closer to the realm of pure absolutes, is held to be superior to the body, which is rooted in lowly actuality. Brain work is accorded higher status than physical work: the bureaucrat is paid more than the factory hand, and so on. It is quite remarkable for college students--so close to becoming qualified to work behind a desk--to choose to work with her hands. Ultimately, it's a quality of life issue: what work is going to be most satisfying? That a craft continues to be an attractive option in the age of computers and bureaucracies proves that human animals still value their hands, and that these most sensitive of instruments still modulate the world in powerful

ways. The hand molding clay, hands holding a mallet and chisel, the hand touching fabric, the object taking shape when before there was nothing but formless mud or wood or thread--craft diverts experience back to the physical. The choice of craft is not anachronistic. It is a statement that we still live in a body rich in potential. In a sense craft always tries to perform a metaphysical revision: the return of labor to equal status with thought.

### The Symbolic Value of Craftsmanship

All this relates to question of technical virtuosity. What is the value of mastery of a craft? In the fine arts world, virtuosity has been regarded with intense suspicion ever since Manet intentionally employed rough painting to criticize the mindless polish of Academic styles. Today, critics continue to use words like "raw" and "tough" to applaud sloppiness for its presumed authenticity. The same school of thought attacks fine craftsmanship as an end in itself that distracts the artist from becoming more creative and original. Until recently, a basic article of faith in the Modernist academy was that careful, controlled work has no aesthetic potential. But in the crafts world, fine workmanship is regarded either as a known quantity to be manipulated like a tool or as a worthy and self-rewarding goal. Conservatives in the field hold that fine craft has intrinsic value. They see mastery as a purpose of object-making, to be valued and encouraged for its own sake, and they enjoy the challenge of difficulty, regarding skillful work as evidence of rare achievement.

On the other hand, the art-craft faction asserts that skill merits admiration only insofar as it's justified by another agenda. They refute the argument for virtuosity by pointing to any number of well-made but derivative craft objects, like the hundreds of imitation Scandinavian-modern teapots cranked out by American silversmiths in the 1950s and 60s. Most were technically competent, but lacked the innovation of the Danish originals. Because the end result was compromised by lack of originality, it is argued that craftsmanship alone could not improve the object. By logical extension of the Modernist argument, virtuoso technique has no aesthetic impact.

If Modernist criteria are put aside, however, fine craftsmanship takes on a different meaning. In Japan and Korea, mastery of technique is understood as evidence of spiritual maturity. To a Buddhist, work spent on attaining skill necessarily contributes to higher awareness. It is regarded as a spiritual discipline to have repeated the same act thousands of times, to have paid careful attention in years of work, and finally to have achieved perfection. Virtuosity is admired not just for its own sake, but because it demonstrates a religious accomplishment.

Even if Americans don't have the same respect for patience, mastery and spiritual discipline, fine work can still prove that the maker cares passionately about his work, and refuses to compromise his standards. Concern for a job well done and steadfast refusal to surrender to expedience show an integrity that is increasingly rare in this society.

Anybody who has had their car repaired by a careless mechanic or a faucet fixed by a sloppy plumber is vividly reminded of the need for rigorous standards. While technique

alone cannot rescue an ill-considered design from mediocrity, the effort should still be honored.

### Tactility: Engaging the Senses

Some of the most pervasive and least examined aspects of craft are its sensuous qualities, especially its appeal to touch. Reductive Modernism restricted aesthetic experience in the visual arts to sight alone, as if no other pleasures were possible. But craft objects, because they are used in so many ways, engage all the senses but taste. When a pot is held, it conveys weight, balance, and density. Lifting a heavy, thick-walled pot is very different from holding a thin, light one. The surface texture of clay and glaze is experienced at the same time, and offers a distinct pleasure. Weavers and garment makers are conscious of the feel of different fabrics, from silk to denim. The material controls how the garment feels, how appealing it is, how well it will insulate, and how it will drape and weigh on the body. None of these experiences rely on sight, but all of them have an aesthetic component.

Certain types of jewelry, like chain-mail, have properties of weight, motion and temperature change that can only be understood when the object is worn. Sound is also part of the craft experience: the clink of a fork on a plate; the chime of a glass; the tiny note of a dangling earring that only the wearer can hear. Some potters will ring the rim of a pot like a bell to test the fit of clay body and glaze. And, of course, there's the immensely seductive feel of polished and oiled wood, or the perfect fit of a dovetail joint.

Richard Wagner regarded his operas as a composite of all the arts: music; literature in the libretto; painting and architecture in the set design. He aimed for a totality of sensual experience that he called synesthesia. While craft may not be able to encompass the entire catalog of senses in one object (Wagner ignored smell and taste, too), it is clear that craft engages a great deal more than sight. So far, however, most people seem content to remark that such phenomena occur, and do not consider how sight, touch and hearing can be organized in a unified composition. Craftsmen intuitively make judgments of how sound or touch intersects with the visual but never think much about it. Here is another conceptual field, ripe for exploration, that remains ignored.

### The Meaning of Decoration

You can always tell a true Modernist by the way he uses the word “decorative”—as a perjorative. Modernism abandoned decoration in a fit of righteous indignation early in this century. The harshest opponent of ornament was the Viennese architect Adolf Loos, who set forth his principles in “Ornament and Crime” (1908). According to Loos, all ornament can be traced to childish graffiti—sexual images smeared in fecal matter. The same impulse is manifested in the present day as tattoos (Loos claimed that only savages and criminals bear tattoos). Decoration represents only the lowest of human impulses, so it must be stripped from art and design, especially from useful objects. While Loos’s argument seems laughable today, for the past 80 years Modernist designers have behaved as if it were true.

The upshot is that craft is profoundly uncertain about the legitimacy of decoration. Given that craft has traded in decoration for thousands of years, it is peculiar that this central purpose is currently called into question. When decoration is applied to a craft object, it is usually justified in formal terms. A potter, for example, relying on the language of Modernism, might speak of enhancing the form of the pot with painted glazes. Since formalism was invented to describe the pure autonomous art object, using those ideas to explain decoration is problematic.

A rigorous interpretation of disinterestedness would insist that decoration is aesthetically valid only to the extent it is purely formal. Any inherent meaning or use would not qualify. And then, strict formalism would demand that all decoration be essential to the composition (remember, perfect design having no extraneous elements), which immediately disqualifies anything *applied* to a form. Of course, most decoration *is* applied, literally and figuratively. Any craftsman who attempts to justify decoration with Modernist theory is stretching the limits of credibility.

If we see craft as a device to address psychological need, however, decoration makes more sense. Decoration is a signifier. In cultures all over the world, ritual objects, dwellings, the body, and even cars and trucks are decorated as signs of individual and social identity. Most ornamentation speaks in commonly understood visual language, so people live in a dense continuum of meaning. For example, tattoos are not the badge of savagery that Loos claimed them to be, but texts that everybody in a society can read. Scarification, masks, costumes and jewelry serve similar purposes. In most societies, decoration is a social code; to go without it is to go naked and stripped of meaning.

Modernism's insistence on rational, formal relationships has managed to make decoration seem superfluous. But in the real world, the effects of Modernist architecture suggest that people suffer in sterile, unornamented environments. A study showed that after Scotland Yard moved from its fussy Victorian building to a new, theoretically correct Modernist office, morale plummeted. A visit to any college dormitory would reveal that most students react to long, featureless corridors and blank walls by plastering their rooms with posters, signs, slogans and advertisements. The workers who moved into Corbusier's housing project in Pessac wasted no time before nailing on shutters and added pitched roofs to their Modernist boxes. Refusing to be brainwashed, they applied decoration that symbolized "home." The evidence suggests that the impulse to adorn is neither primitive nor childish.

Clearly, decoration can still convey meaning. (It can also be completely arbitrary and meaningless.) It is unfortunate that most artists and designers have abandoned decoration so thoroughly. A vacuum of meaning has opened up, filled, by default, with merchandise from K-Mart and Sears. At the same time, craftspeople seem unable to explain the purpose of decoration. Had craft any ambition to communicate, and especially to ameliorate the alienation and social ills that cause so much pain, ornamentation would be a perfect vehicle. If craftspeople could overcome their art-guilt, look respectfully at decoration and study its social functions, they could recover their heritage. If craftsmen understand ornament as a play of meaning, not a thin veneer of style, then perhaps the demon of Modernism could finally be exorcised.

## In Summary

The ideas I have set forth involve contingencies--the many ways a craft object can be connected to the real world. To pursue any one of them would require that the basic rules of Modernism be put aside, and notions as to what is properly aesthetic be repudiated. Fine arts have turned away from Modernist ideology: it is fashionable now to talk about politics, AIDS, relations with the third world, or Feminism in art. These subjects presuppose an art intimately connected to the world, not isolated in a gallery. And yet, most painting, sculpture, video and performance still claim the status and privileges of Modern art, and are reluctant to enter the homes and personal spaces of ordinary people. Those sites remain the province of craft.

It should be clear that I am no friend of Modernism. I believe its ideas have done much damage. Certainly, there is a place for pure, unalloyed visual pleasure, and Modernist theories describe how to judge an object intended for that purpose. But those kinds of objects have surrendered many of art's--and craft's--important purposes: to remind ordinary people of their position in the cosmos; to point to meaning; to be used; to help; to heal; to entertain. Those functions were discarded in the name of the self-rewarding aesthetic experience, and it's high time craftsmen reclaim them. Craft once played all those roles, and, to some extent, it still does. But the criteria so dear to Modernists have narrowed and stunted craft, asking it to fit into the same straight-jacket that painting and sculpture once willingly strapped on. The more I consider it, the more I think craft practitioners should give up the pursuit of Modernist art entirely. Either that, or craftsmen

should have the courage to simply declare that they are sculptors, and then be prepared to fully engage in the art world's contentious discourse.

Given these choices, it seems best, in my view, to relinquish art-envy and stop aspiring to the alleged nobility of fine art. It is equally noble to communicate with people and to produce objects that personalize rather than alienate. The traditional roles of craft offer rich possibilities, if only they can be reshaped to be relevant to social conditions today. What craft has always done is its strength. The challenge is to consciously, carefully build upon tradition. The project is no less creative, no less difficult, than any agenda in modern art .

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<sup>i</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith, *The Story of the Craftsman's Role in Society*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 271

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara Cartlidge, *Twentieth Century Jewelry* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985), and Peter Dormer and Ralph Turner, *The New Jewelry: Trends and Traditions* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985).

<sup>iii</sup> SNAG Newsletter, Number 100, June 1992

<sup>iv</sup> Harold Osborne, *Aesthetics and Art Theory, An Historical Introduction* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970), 160-161.

<sup>v</sup> Greenberg made this statement in April 1992 at the conference "Critical Studies in the Craft Arts: Crossings, Alignments and Territories" at New York University, which the author attended.

<sup>vi</sup> The American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959

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<sup>vii</sup> John Bentley Mays, “Comment” *American Craft* December 1985/January 1986, 38-39.

<sup>viii</sup> Jan Tschichold, a Bauhaus student and promoter of *Die Neue Typographie*, wrote in 1946 that Modernist typography “conforms to the German bent for the absolute, and its military will to regulate, and its claim to absolute power reflect those fearful components of the German character which set loose Hitler’s power and the Second World War.”

Quoted in Philip Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1983).

<sup>ix</sup> See John Bentley Mays, *op. cit.*