



# **The Craft of Sensing**

Irreproducibility in Art and the Factory



Dedicated to Lynne Choo  
mother, friend and artistic colleague

# **The Craft of Sensing**

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## Introduction

"Archaic Greece, like many other societies that anthropologists until quite recently labeled 'traditional', took it for granted that skill would be handed down from generation to generation [...]" [1]

-Richard Sennett

Between the mid-19th century and throughout the early part of the 21st century, a shift began to occur in the production of objects within North American societies. This shift from cottage industry trades to industrial production also changed the way art was both viewed and produced. Cottage industry artisans who are highly skilled in their chosen field began to compete with large companies, turning to more mechanical working practices. These practices aimed at increasing the capacity to produce more objects with less manual labour involved.

Industrialization brought about a reflection in North American and European art that questioned the relevance of a salon as a setting for modernism. Fast moving modernism was catching up to art. The artist during that time and even now to a degree, was one who works in a studio engaged in a personal translation from mind, extending through hand and tool to materiality. This process is internal; the potency of the artwork is authenticated through a one-on-one relationship before being exhibited in an outer world of scrutiny. In contemporary art, artists seem to be moving more towards a direct exterior process, with a focus on local and international identities (the artist as persona) or working site-specifically and often outsourcing the actual making of an artwork. These practices began in the 1960's and continue to find validity in current art dialogues.

In this thesis, I will look at works by Marcel Duchamp, Bas Jan Ader, Kurt Schwitters, Daniel Buren and Constantin Brancusi and how they relate to craft, industrialization, studio or non-studio practices. I will begin with my personal experience as a craftsman and discuss the industrialization of manufacturing processes through the use of writings by labour theorist Stephen Wood who expands upon Marxist views on deskilling by Harry Braverman. I will also introduce what Franco "Bifo" Berardi's refers to as 'alienation and desire' and how this effects our current time period. Next, I will discuss John Robert's ideas about 'unreproducible' objects, questioning their possible benefits to the factory worker. Performance art works by Bas Jan Ader help to re-enforce how acceptance of failure lead to greater empathy in art, while moving away from the purely conceptual practice of Sol Lewitt. After this, I move into a personal dialogue which endeavors to define what makes a work of art crafted in order to understand its validity in 21st century art. I will examine Duchamp's piece, *Fountain*, using Thierry de Duve's historical research to explain how the artist was a proprietor of craft, rather than opposed it. Following this, I will discuss Richard Sennett's writings on how the tool or instrument is made by a craftsperson in order to surpass skill. I will look at how a craftsman's apprentice performs a rite of passage in an attempt to forge

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identity and societal subjugation, while the artist's role aims to enact autonomy further transferring this lineage onto the studio apprentice. Constantin Brancusi is referred to in this thesis as a quintessential example of both studio artist and craftsman. Kurt Schwitters turns the studio into a work in of itself, while Daniel Buren abandons the studio to externalize a staged situation where he aims to transform our relationship (as the viewer) to architecture. I will end my conclusion in favour of a shift towards implementing autonomous art practices of irreproducibility within the factory labour system.

### **The desensitizing of craft**

Through personal experience, I have worked on both a manufacturing line and being traditionally trained as an all-around craftsperson by a man who was the 6th generation of shoemakers in his family. My experiences have moved me through a process of traditional shoemaking and family values, to the deskilling of my craft and dehumanizing of myself while labouring in a large factory setting.

At age eighteen, I left high school with little idea what to make of myself in the world. While my teachers and family diligently attempted to reinforce the necessity to choose a university study, I felt discouraged at the prospect of accumulating a large sum of debt while feeling uncertain of what I wished to contribute through the labour system. What I had seen around me was an increased population of over-educated and unemployed university students, underpaid service-industry workers, an inflated housing market too expensive for most and a growing disparity among elders who struggled to catch up with capitalism's hastening demands. I did not want to be a part of this system. While I wished to contribute to society and felt a drive to work, I needed to find work that I imagined would feel both nourishing to my soul and have tangible offerings to my community. I chose to pursue a craft. I equated the assurance of hand skills with both competence and maturity. I could provide for myself and others while seeking to develop personal mastery to fill my spirit.

After seven years of apprenticeship, I took a job in a large factory. This move to the factory required a simplification of my trade, using fewer skills to perform one task apart from the rest. In smaller family-owned businesses I worked for, shoemakers would make a shoe from start to finish. Many skills are required to build a pair of shoes, from sanding the wooden lasts which form their mirrored shape, drawing and cutting patterns, transferring these patterns to leather, then using a number of different methods to sew and detail the models, while finally building the "uppers" on the lasts and soling their traction. When all these skills were combined and after years of understanding how and why certain methods sequenced each other, I experienced this competency I had searched for. This competency or maturity in my skills allowed me the freedom to express form at will. I could make any shape with confidence, make whatever came to mind no matter its degree of difficulty. I could problem-solve the complications of untried experiments and turn them into wearable, functional objects of daily use.

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After fifteen years of making shoes, an unsettling feeling of distance began to separate me from my trade and passion. The monotony of assembly line work in the factory and lack of full usage of my skill set began to numb my experience of work, draining my physical energy and bringing back my earlier worries of lacking purpose in my career. I began to feel disassociated from what my hands performed and made in a day. It was like working on automatic pilot. I dreamed of a way to get out of this desensitized state.

In Franco "Bifo" Berardi's chapter on "Alienation and desire" in *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, he writes:

"In the history of capitalism the body was disciplined and put to work while the soul was left to hold on, unoccupied and neglected. What the workers wished to do with their souls, their thoughts, language and affects presented no interest for the capitalist of the industrial times. Eight hours a day (or nine, ten, twelve) the body is forced to repeat strange, alienated, hostile movements. The soul is mute while it rebels; then the body refuses to submit, interrupting its services, breaking the chain and blocking the productive flow." [2]

While I can attest to Berardi's description of a soul in muted rebellion, searching for ways to liberate an alienated body from meaningless work, there remains a constraint in the necessity to work within this capitalistic model in order to pay for daily sustenance. This is the bind which the majority of the world's population are in and holds people back from walking out of the factories which fetters us. This is also the bind which most artists face, who generally have even less financial stability through their artistic work than the craftsman. How can we leave a system which we are bound that is working us to a point of exhaustion (both physically as labourers and externally draining our natural resources) without a viable, nourishing alternative system to enter? Stephen Wood discusses this problem in *The Degradation of Work? skill, deskilling, and the labour process*, by saying:

"Braverman's treatment of the degradation of craft work (Braverman, 1976) focuses upon two central imperatives of the capitalist organization of the labour process. The first is the concern to cheap labour: in Marxist terms, to reduce the value of labour power by substituting complex for simple labour...The second and more fundamental imperative for Braverman is to guarantee effective capitalist control of the labour process- by dissolving those esoteric skills which underpinned effective craft opposition to the re-organization of production in the hands of capital and its agents." [3]



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"Hot Autumn" strike, Italy, 1969

What Stephen Wood suggests of Braverman's analysis has long been set into motion. The automotive factory of the 1950's is one example of this "deskilling" of labour Braverman coined in the 70's. A good decade before that, Franco "Bifo" Berardi was already stirring socialist labour riots (Fiat Riot 1962) in Italy, calling an end to capitalist defragmentation of European automotive workers. Wood's description of 'esoteric skills' applied to craftsmanship is an ancient model, unfit for most contemporary trades. For example in ancient blacksmithing, such as in Celtic or China's Song Dynasty cultures, weapons were made for warriors believed to be the descendants of gods. The skill involved in the making these swords had to imbue a divine quality. The products of today's Westernized standards are based on short-term usage. Many products are even made to be intentionally discarded within 2 years or less. Additionally, Western culture has become increasingly more Atheist or non-sectarian in religious beliefs. This is why I prefer the term 'emotive skill', as it has the ability to relate to a broader human quality which experiences a direct impact from the type of work one does. Berardi refers to the soul at work as that of a simple, humanistic performance of labour connected to an emotional body. It is an emotional body, what he refers to as the "erotic body", that any person can access through connecting to the materials of one's craft, regardless of ritual devotion to a higher calling of emulating creation. The erotic or emotional body at work conveys a sensuality through an introspective practice of skill through intimate thought expressed from the making of an object. Recalling the idea of esoteric skills, a ritual performance is linked to capitalistic ideals which simplify object-making by streamlining repetitious production. Walter Benjamin referred to ritual as the basis of an "authentic" [4] work of art in, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. In this thesis, I refer to ritual with regards to the cyclic reproduction of the factory assembly line. This repetition de-prioritizes invention in favour of smaller innovations due to a shortened cycle of supply-and-demand. The ritual or cycle is repeated over and over again- duplication processes need to be easy to manufacture in order to keep up with increasing product orders. If a complicated design is proposed for a product, the factory would have to invest too much money on updating the computers or machinery used to

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make it. They would rather use existing machinery for as long as possible, to avoid cutting into profits. Without the duplication of production, ritualism would be replaced by acts of making without guarantee of a particular outcome. This seems like a chaotic proposal for a capitalist arrangement of work, but not necessarily for the artist. A proposal for variable production processes and end result are the grounds for continual stimuli for an artist.

### The process of inevitable failures

In *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readmade*, John Roberts describes a sense of liberation felt while making an “unreproducible” work of art:

"[...] the unreproducible work of art encapsulates or concretizes a particular kind of artistic autonomy, freely sensuous artistic subjectivity. Freely sensuous labour may appropriate the materials and techniques of determinate, heteronomous labour, but the making of the work is secured solely through the autonomous actions of the producer." [5]

What makes a work of art irreproducible? A complexity in its process of construction involving technical skill together with personal gesture, subconscious ideas and personal subjectivity make it difficult to reproduce an exact duplicate. I emphasize what makes this recipe irreproducible is mainly determined by the affects of chance and error. Chance and error are not criteria which can be exacted. While they are exact within themselves, neither will become or happen precisely the same. It is through this process in art by working with chance and error, that unique artworks can be made.

### Failing as an artist

There is an important distinction to be made between failure as an artistic subject matter, such as aesthetic failure or failure as an artist topic, compared to failing or making a mistake when crafting an object through the craftsman's eyes. As artists or art viewers, we may come to accept failure or a mistake in the craftsmanship of a work of art and even find it charming or forgiving in some way, while through the traditional craftsman's perspective a fault in executing the making of an object would be deemed undesirable and perhaps even discarded (due to its decrease in monetary value). In Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman*, he discusses a difference between correctness and functionality. The craftsman bases his or her standard of completing a piece by its functionality. The piece needs to work and be delivered on time to the user. The standard of quality sets a higher bar when considering correctness. To achieve correctness in a piece implies both functionality and perfection in execution, "To the absolutist in every craftsman, each imperfection is a failure; to the practitioner, obsession with perfection seems a prescription for failure." [6] What Sennett means by “a prescription of failure” is that a piece can potentially never end, when trying to

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Bas Jan Ader, Fall I, Fall II (1970)

perfect it. There needs to be a point when one says, stop, its complete. The danger of over-working an object, is that there is a higher risk of damaging the piece when it is close to perfection.

The topic of failure was the basis of Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader's work and short-lived career. In his 1970's video performances, Ader deliberately works with the act of failure by focusing his material choice upon his own body, allowing himself to fall off a roof, or to bicycle directly into an Amsterdam canal. What makes his visual message of failure so vivid, is the intense conviction in which he carries through an act of failure. Through total conviction, one is left with an absolute truth. While this is a subjective truth, it is moreover convincing when carried through until its end in all thoroughness. Ader is not afraid to fall. He continually confronts disaster, only to show the viewer that no matter how hard he falls, he will survive. Failure confronts us with our own mortality. Ader continued to push himself, pitting his fragility and ineptitude as a human against nature. Rather than avoid calamity, he aimed to go straight into it to see what happened. Would he live, become injured, unscathed or die? He revealed a fine line, walking a tight-rope of life and death. What stops us from injuring our self or facing pre-mature death is a stable mind. Normally people would avoid cycling into a canal for fear of drowning. Instead, he went straight for it. The path of avoiding calamity is not clearly marked on the pavement. In 1975, Ader was pronounced "lost at sea" while attempting to sail a tiny craft single-handedly across the Atlantic Ocean as part of a performance work entitled, *In Search of the Miraculous*. His capsized vessel was found somewhere between Cape Cod, Massachusetts and Ireland, while his body was never recovered. Yet beyond the events that have ended in tragedy, when watching an archived video performance of Ader's work there is a precision in his errors; these errors are given specific placement within the context of trial. While I am not an artist, who would take failure to such extremes as to question whether or not I am failing at life, I can appreciate the value in failure as something that is inherently part of existence. When used as a positive strategy, chance and accident can open an artist to find new pathways in their process. An accident or chance occurrence which provides an outcome more desired than the initial idea has a way of nourishing a process, accelerating development. If the artist were to stick to

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Sol Lewitt, *Incomplete Cubes*, 1974



Rirkrit Tiravanija, detail of *Untitled (Fountain)*, 1994

the original plan, never allowing an accident to factor in, he or she may miss a valuable opportunity to discover a new way of making art.

Sol Lewitt, an important founder of Conceptual Art wrote about “irrational judgments” (1969) in his art practice. In “Statement Number 3” of his *Sentences on Conceptual Art* he writes, “Irrational judgements lead to new experience” [7]; the art he advocated for was used in a formal manner, to interrupt logical thought while aiming to construct a series of sculptural forms that meant to show a string of development. He worked by drawing changed versions of a form (such as the cube), working out his concept on paper before finalizing it as a sculpture. The Conceptual Art of Lewitt and others are difficult to enter and decipher for the general public, which is why many viewers dismiss this kind of art, for lack of understanding or believing it to be much simpler than it means. Lewitt worked in a premeditative way, such as how a chess player mentally tries out all possible strategies before executing a final move on the board. I am deliberately using the chess player as a metaphor for art which does not display the artist’s process. When I come to introduce the artworks of Marcel Duchamp, who was an avid chess player, this metaphoric device will help in identifying these two streams of art, Conceptual Art and Process Art.

Process Art exposes the inner workings of the artist, inviting the viewer to participate vicariously in the process. This invitation, unlike the strategies of Conceptual Art which are water-tight in execution, aims to lessen the gap between artist and non-artist. While partly educative or instrumentative, it also demystifies the artist as genius. Process Art invites the viewer to participate in following the artist’s train of thought. This is why Conceptual Art is often dismissed by the general public because the viewer cannot understand why or how the artist made certain choices. Why place an empty cup in a room? What does it mean? How did it get there? What does it symbolize? The viewer is left to second-guess the artist or fill in the blanks. This has become a major topic in recent years within the Dutch art scene

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among known artists of my own circle. If a work of art needs a long, written, curatorial description to understand what the piece is about, then it is not doing its job as a visual communication device. Fundamentally, art is what you see. Whether it is a painting or a sculpture, a video or a performance, what the viewer sees or experiences from the work of art is primary to what is reflected about it. Exhibition guides are either borrowed from research notes used by the artist to work out an idea, or historical reflections about the art work after it has been seen by an art historian. The art historian may find a thread of similarity between the work of this artist and one of past. This historical red thread is used to add credibility to the work. Yet this is precisely what makes the art institution a gated community.

### **The struggle to define craft in contemporary art**

Friend and artist Jabu Arnell and I sat down one evening trying to nail down a definition of craft in art today. We found it difficult to find a definition we could both agree on. Sitting with a plastic cup in hand, a left over party favour, I twirled and fidgeted with the empty cup trying to figure out what would make this object a "crafted" piece of art in my mind. Is it enough to place this cup in an art space and call it crafted? If we take careful consideration into lighting the object in a space, its position in proximity to the walls surrounding it, floor, ceiling, the nearest work beside it, how the visitor might walk around and approach it and considering various connotations, would it then be considered a crafted piece of art? Does craft include its presentation? Is the object crafted once it has been given a title? This last question leads to a whole discipline of art- the art of writing. Is writing crafted? Certainly so, not only does poetic license prove skill as a writer, but even the very tradition of handwriting by scratching lead across the surface of a material plane, forming pictorial symbols strung together which make up words and grouping them into even longer sequences of meaning holds, originates from drawing. If we accept the craft of writing, we could argue that by entitling a found object or material, we have crafted it. But then reading a type-written and printed title card or handwritten title on the wall alone would be enough to suffice what a crafted work of art is by definition. Why the cup then?

If we introduce a second material or object together with the title card, such as the plastic cup, a suggestion of physical realness supports what the words propose in our minds. But does that make the cup crafted? Or is it borrowed to add "weight" to an argument which may otherwise be too lofty to pin down?

Scrunching the plastic cup with my hand, I awkwardly tried to sculpt my own definition of craft with Jabu. My conclusion was that a bare minimum of one object or material, plus one human action is needed to change the material's physical presence, its shape. Scrunching a plastic cup mimics that of molding a clay vessel. When Jabu scrunches the cup, his cup's shape will become different than mine. No two cups will be exactly the same when worked by a human hand. Neither left or right hand will produce the same formed cup. The object

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can stand freely without needing a title. Its physicality and its changed meaning is understood not only visually or interpreted in the mind's eye, but understood physically through the body of the viewer. This physical tracing is what craft defines. The physical effort exerted by the maker is embodied in the transformed cup.

### The art of indifference

In 1917, Marcel Duchamp made a rift in the art world by intending to exhibit his "readymade" object, *Fountain*, in New York's *Armory Show*. During that time most artworks were exhibited in a salon atmosphere, where traditional disciplines such as painting or sculpture were framed, hung against a wall or placed upon a pedestal and elevated in stature above the floor. The Armory Show was organized with an invitation to allow anyone to exhibit two paintings for the cost of a \$6 entry fee. There would be no jury selection for the exhibition. Duchamp chose a common commercially manufactured object, a porcelain urinal, to present at the show. This stands as a key work within art history, symbolic of factory production and whether a found object (chosen by the artist) could be considered a work of art. The work of *Fountain* also protested aesthetic notions of beauty. He chose this by what he accounted for as "aesthetic indifference". He neither liked, nor disliked this object for its artistic qualities. "[...] the laymen or the public wants something that pleases him. That's taste. And there are three kinds of forms of it, bad, good and indifferent taste. So I'm of the indifferent taste." [8]

Duchamp's act critiqued traditional principles of aesthetics in favour of making choices based a more neutral classification for an object. Calling a urinal "indifferent" seems rather cheeky given on reference to waste or defilement. How can it be refrained from aesthetics while blunt in its subjective statement? What Duchamp was aiming at was to introduce the banal in art.

As it came to pass, Duchamp's *Fountain* failed to meet the approval of taste in his time. The Armory Show's organizers (which he was also a member of) removed his object before the opening, discarding it behind a partition. Most likely Duchamp had prepared himself for this rejection, as he took the precaution of distancing himself from it by signing the object with an alias. This alias will come to perform a more important task for the artwork. He chose to sign it with a hand-painted name, the way paintings were traditionally signed at the bottom of the canvas. Since the show was meant to be a painting exhibition, I am left to conclude that Duchamp was using this device to critique painting. Being the only sculpture in the exhibition, it seems to be a suggestion that painting can be three-dimensional. This was a radical proclamation on its own one hundred years ago, when painting and sculptural camps were firmly divided. If Duchamp had actually chosen an object more banal or indifferent as he puts it and less derogatory, he may have won over his colleagues sooner.

What is key within this artwork are four things: the decision by the artist to choose it,

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Marcel Duchamp, Fountain, 1917



found urinal in a restaurant, Amsterdam, 2012

transference of context from one environment to the next, its title and final signing of an artistic name on the object in handwriting.

The idea that an artwork does not have to be made but can be claimed, emphasizes the artist's identity in the field of art. The artist's identity "I am an/the artist" casts authority to govern what an artwork is by suggestion of expertise on the subject of art. Should it have not been an artist who chose the urinal, taking it from a plumbing store or men's restroom and placing it in an art space, would it still be deemed an artwork? Can the layperson, less academically knowledgeable in art define what is or call him or herself an artist? If anything can be viewed as art, then this person would not have to be an artist, only to have a relationship to art through aesthetics.

These evolutions in thinking on what makes an artwork or what defines an artist, had much to accredit Marcel Duchamp's move to separate his own craftsmanship and bring attention to reality by borrowing an object from ordinary life which we can all recognize and relate to. By transferring the context of the urinal from its outside environment (daily life) and placing it in the art exhibition, the work is read as art. Yet, what gives the readymade works of Marcel Duchamp even greater speculative interest, is a suggestion by some art historians that Duchamp may not have found some of the readymade objects he chose, but made them

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with such high skill that they were believed to be industrially manufactured objects. In *tout-fait*, December, 2000, Volume 1, Issue 3 of the online research journal dedicated to studying Marcel Duchamp, Rhonda Roland Shearer writes, "[...] Duchamp states that he purchased his original 1917 urinal at a Mott plumbing store (at a correct New York City address). Yet the shape of his urinal does not match any models found in Mott catalogues or, in fact, in any other plumbing catalogues in 1917, or at any time before or since according to scholars' investigations of the historical record." [9] This dead end to finding an exact match for Duchamp's urinal was first reported by Duchampian scholar, William Camfield, and backed up by researcher, Kirk Varnedoe. Whether or not it can be proved that *Fountain* was mass-produced in a factory, this case opens the possibility that he may have hand-crafted an object with such skill, that it disguised itself among objects of machined precision.

Signing *Fountain* with a hand-painted alias "*R. Mutt*" not only circles back upon a notion of how painting gestures proclaim an artwork, but at the same time places less importance on an artist's ego. He substituted his own name to make way for the anonymity of the commoner. Yet, one must be privy to how art was produced and within what context in order to make such a jump forward. This would be a difficult task for a non-artist who just bought a similar object and submitted it to the Armory Show.

One would have to have been extremely naive, or like him, knowingly rebellious in this act. Why would anyone who does not consider her or himself an artist want to present such an object in an art institution? He or she would have to have a premeditative idea or opinion on what art is or is not in order to find an art institution a platform to question or mock it. Even if it were only to react on a subject of art, a non-artist would be stopped at the door by most museums. The definition of indifference, meaning "a lack of interest, concern, or sympathy" provides an apt description of the art institution's response to classism.

### From indifference to seduction

Duchamp would have to knock on Art's critical doors if he were to find praise for his inventiveness. Very few have actually viewed the original *Fountain* of 1917, as it is thought to have been lost or stolen shortly after its controversial debut. What we have come to know as *Fountain* today, is that of a replica object exhibited or a carefully crafted photographic image taken by another well-known artist at the time, Alfred Stieglitz. "When *Fountain* was rejected, Duchamp resigned from the board of the Independents on the grounds that the rule to open submission had been flouted, and mounted a campaign of support for the mysterious R. Mutt. This involved persuading Alfred Stieglitz to photograph the urinal [...] he (Stieglitz) went to great lengths to produce a convincing and sympathetic photograph of the object, which in its play of shadows, emphasized the implicit sexual ambiguity of the inverted urinal." [10]



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Stieglitz, known to be a perfectionistic photographer, would have left no chance in constructing a carefully seductive image of the urinal. Placed in front of the backdrop of a painting entitled *The Warriors* by Marsden Hartley, the urinal was poised upon a pedestal as a symbol to fight against prejudice (de Duve, 1996). It has since come to gain multiple interpretations, including sexual innuendo and religious connotation. "The surprising thing about this photograph is not so much that Stieglitz annexed the urinal to his own aesthetics of symbolist correspondences [...] but that Duchamp let him do it. And when, thanks to the photograph, the piece was redubbed 'Buddha or Madonna of the Bathroom' - associations hardly congenial to Duchamp's own aesthetics..." [11]

In sum, Duchamp was a man who was very skilled as an artist. He contributed fine examples of Fauvist, Cubist and Dada works during their prominent periods in art history. When he saw fit to hand-make a part of his sculptural works, he was also not adverse to executing his craft. Furthermore, he was a proponent of using a craftiness of mind. While *Fountain* serves to remain a symbol of the acceptance of factory-made objects and rebuttal toward craftsmanship, it is important to recognize that this is more mythical than fact.

### A tool surpassing its user and the maker surpassing his tool

A craftsperson strives to obtain greater precision in dexterity, emphasizing control and full range of acute pressure upon a tool in motion. Such like the precision of a professional musician who at will may switch from the most subtle and delicate to violently striking notes within the same piece, a professional craftsperson handles her/his tools with the same lucid precision. Sennett refers to music in his analogy of craft, through his experience as a violinist and accounts of the workshop of Antonio Stradivari. "The master, however, was everywhere present in the production...Stradivari occupied himself the smallest of details in the production of his violins." [12]

For the craftsperson, who intrinsically understands the usage or function of objects he or she makes with a vast subtlety in the range of notes and their character, the relationship between the musician playing such an instrument becomes surpassed in skill by that of the instrument. Playing must excel to "make" the note. The potential to "make" that note was always there, within the instrument and awaiting the challenge to be played. It is only when the instrument or object surpasses its intended user can a facilitation of endless growth occur. If the musical instrument were of poor quality, the musician would at some point in practice outgrow the instrument, or never be able to play with virtuosity.

Craft, or better yet the mastery of tools, has been a fundamental basic human drive in progressing a culture's quality of life. We have survived and further thrived through the facilitation of tools that we invented. The process of inventing tools directly mirrors the progression of the maker's ability to perform the function. The tool, when first invented,

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begins as a more crude, rudimentary form that facilitates basic usage and general outcome. Specialization and acute functions (which gives access to the farthest tip of the fingers) later develop- through the process of making new tools, which in turn increase the abilities of making. "[...] finer tools, however, proved harder to use; the very precision of the scalpel challenged the hand technique required of the doctor or dissector." [13]

But how necessary is it in contemporary art to make a thing well? Very often, there is a poorness of hand skill in art or naivety in execution. This naive quality or amateurism in professional art are not so much a successful irony, but more of a deliberate strategy by the artist. Making seemingly amateuristic art provokes questions of classism or hierarchy in "high and lowbrow art", and its existence in the art world make space for different spheres in society to be represented. Poor skill in professional art is precisely used to convey a message. A shaky, unsure or blunt hand, an assertive and assured gesture, all fit within virtuosity allowing more range and depth to happen in an art practice. I would like to propose a redefining of virtuosity to include chance and error as part of the process in exercising a full range of skill.

### **When materials speak to us**

Objects, whether crafted or found and then re-contextualized are interpreted by way of reviewing their material history. The viewer's interpretation takes into account an object's material origin and make-up. Objects such as Duchamp's readymades lend much of their success to how affective their material origins communicate to the viewer. The viewer builds either a confirming or disaffirming relationship to the sculpture based its association to a known fact about the material. I will refer to this as a language of materiality. This language is different but inter-connected to visual language. Its difference emerges from the viewer's ability to perceive three-dimensional materials beyond the sense of sight alone. Therefore, we need to include the other senses of touch, smell, audibility, taste and physical memory in its definition. This language of materiality is learned and gathered through a complex grouping of memories or collective socialization through our environment. The art viewer or artist obtains this education about materials through accessing different environments, taking note of the objects, buildings and all other constructed materials around them. These can be organic occurrences in nature or both human and artificially constructed. Their visual tracings are stored as material memory. Strangely, the gathering of material recollection is not limited to physical experience or being present at a situation, but can also be collected from the Internet, literature and other visual media such as film.

Materials carry an associative quality within our memory of them. A recollection of a material's history, its properties, what it was used for, in what industry or how is it used in the making of something can easily be recounted. For example, one can look at a board of plywood. The narrative sequence occurs before the mind. Perhaps one may think of construction sites, house-building, walls or a floor, sawing, hammering, nails, trees, the

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process of tree to plywood production, etc.

Richard Sennett links anthropomorphosis (assigning human characteristics to objects) in craft by a 17th century invention of adding colour to brick making in England: "[...] color issued the first invitation to think of bricks as posing human qualities. Tutor and Stewart buildings, Clifton-Taylor remarks, resembled on the brick surfaces 'the palette of the Impressionist painters', the subtle variations of red making the wall shimmer in the light [...]. The attribution of ethical human qualities- honesty, modesty, virtue- into materials does not aim at explanation; its purpose is to heighten our consciousness of the materials themselves and in this way to think about their virtue." [14]

What is interesting about this statement is that the brick maker is inspired by the colour use in an Impressionist painting to portray light shining on a brick walled dwelling. Ironically, the Impressionist painter aimed to translate the light he saw shining upon the natural brick. His artificial translation through painting bricks, inspire the brick maker to add artificial colour to bricks in order to anthropomorphosize its materiality. This artificial adding of colour to a sculpted material came to be a faux-pas in 1960's minimal art, which aimed at the reduction of image and object communication in order to exact an absolute truth of its origin of being in a present moment. This was executed through a mechanical fashion, where many of the works were produced in factories exempt of any hand gesture by the artist.

In sculpture, the associative qualities in the materials chosen also communicate a secondary sub-meaning in a work, adding to its complete meaning, while re-assembly or new usage and method of construction are combined to give it context (historic and present) in relationship to what the viewer accepts to be true. For example, when using non-traditional sculptural material such as fiberglass, one may look at an artwork made from these materials by studying its form, the smooth or shiny surface and its play on light. Celestial thoughts may come to mind while trying to identify or "place" its material origin in daily life. This may conjure thoughts of boat building. If one is unfamiliar with boat building, perhaps a plastic chair may come to mind. Here, these two associations coalesce. A new meaning emerges, based on the viewer's known registry of what something was in an unformed state, tracing every cut, nail or patch of glue to identify how it was made, trying to piece together what the sculpture is "trying to say" without words or what the artist meant to convey through her/his actions.

### Kurt Schwitters, the crafting of a studio

German artist Kurt Schwitters set out on the slow and deliberate process of altering the reality of internal spaces. He transformed many spaces throughout his artistic career, some of which he worked on while being let to tenants occupying other rooms at the time. His most famous work was '*Hanover Merzbau*', which took him from 1923 until 1936 to make.

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This is perhaps a far more reaching example of an artist who embodied both craft and studio. With Schwitters there was an inseparability of materials and space. Space was defined through materiality and its construction; therefore, the only way to define his own autonomy from a hegemonic system engulfing his body was to make space an extension of himself. Irish sculptor and art critic Brian O'Doherty describes this process, "[...] Schwitters worked inside, 'wearing' his studio, trying it on for size after every addition or change." [15] A proper discussion on space as an extension of the body rewards an extended thesis of its own, but never the less, I refer to it here regarding Schwitters' contribution art as a studio practice. While Brian O'Doherty believes the *Hanover Merzbau* is a form of dress to be garnished by the artist, I tend to find his description rather thin. While, the *Hanover Merzbau* has a direct relationship between space and the body, O'Doherty fails to account for its representation of time. His perception of time moves the work beyond the superficial dressings of fashion or graphic embellishment.

When I look at the work of Kurt Schwitters, I immediately think of Rudolph Steiner's second *Goetheanum*, built between 1924-1928. The *Goetheanum* was actually designed the same year as Schwitters began construction of *Hanover Merzbau* in 1923. Both share a certain visual quality of form in their integration of architecture, time, and space theories. Schwitters and Steiner (Steiner was a mathematician, philosopher and artist) attempted to convey built spaces where the viewer would experience a different sense of time through the space they are standing in (altered by the artist). Rudolph Steiner was very interested in uncharted representations of fourth-dimensional space and time, a topic he lectured about in his *Goetheanum* and university lecture halls throughout Europe between 1905 and 1922. During a question and answer period, recorded in The Hague during 1922, he addresses this subject:

"We can conceive of the physical body as spatial and the body of formative forces as temporal only when we separate space and time. In our usual objective knowledge, time is not present as a given. As you know, time is measured in terms of space; that is, changes in spatial units are our means of knowing about what we call time. But now imagine a different way of measuring time. You no longer measure time in terms of space when you shift to a true experience of time, which people usually do unconsciously. Our thinking actually becomes conscious through imaginative cognition." [16]

Kurt Schwitters works similarly in his attempt to express an ungraspable or new time through art. Here, I must come back to earlier thoughts of Richard Sennett's description of craftsmanship as possessing esoteric skill.

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Kurt Schwitters, Hanover Merzbau, 1923-1936 / stairwell of Goetheanum II, 1924



Daniel Buren, Les Deux Plateaux, 1986

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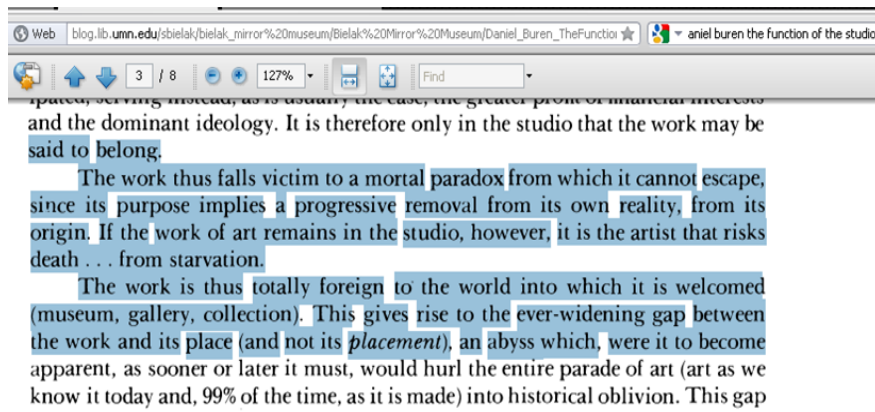
### Daniel Buren's in the house, but not in the studio

While the work of Schwitters concerned the studio as an art work, the work of French artist Daniel Buren is concerned with the institutional spaces of architecture and art history. Schwitters' work also takes on a direct approach to relating to architecture, but he directs his scope to focus on the surroundings of an artist in relationship to his own art process. Buren also leans towards a process-focused practice but in a conceptual way. He refers to these works as "in-situ" or what is better known as site-specific art. In Daniel Buren's 1986 installation work, *Les Deux Plateaux*, commonly known as the "Buren columns", he and architect Patrick Bouchain built a series of black and white striped marble columns in the courtyard of the Palais-Royal in Paris, France. Since 1965, Buren has used a formulaic 8.7 centimeter wide, vertical striped pattern in a muralistic fashion to transform space in relationship to its historical context and institutional position to authority. In this particular work, it can be seen that the artist is in visual communication with two hegemonic institutions of authority- the French Monarch and Ministry of Culture- as it is placed on both palace grounds and in direct view of the ministerial building. The title, which can be translated to mean "The Two Plates", refers to its two-layered meaning.

Buren columns form a kind of garden, using a series of shortened pillars which act in making the palace grounds more accessible to the public viewer, who is free to roam, sit or pose within the environment. Yet the work can also be viewed as an archeological ruin, referring to Greco or Roman temples of past. Underlying the surface of Buren's seemingly anti-hegemonic gesture, I cannot help but suspect he is both a proponent and critic of the institution. *Les Deux Plateaux* is a playground, a shorn forest and a homage to the old greats before it. It both takes down and looks up to the system which governs culture and society.

With regards to his position towards art, Buren is apparently adverse to the studio as the origin in artistic production. In Thomas Repensek's translated version of Buren's French essay into English, Buren describes how he believes that an artist risks metaphorical "starvation" when making works in a studio, as they are in isolation from their source of context. He believes that when a work is taken out of the studio and placed in an exhibition space, it cannot enter an equal dialogue with the institution of art because it will lack the same historical point of perspective. [17]

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What Buren aims at is to place the artist in a lateral position of privilege to the institution. Yet, this access to enter a dialogue with institutions such as museums only comes with invitation. If a regular person or unknown artist were to paint vertical stripes upon a museum's walls without authorization, it would be considered vandalism. Thus, he needs to (already) occupy a position of privilege before entering the dialogue.

As an immigrant, I can akin Buren's statement with familiar nationalistic rhetoric, which believes only people who are born in the country they live in should be allowed to remain because they are "authentic".

### A journey on foreign soil, through the eyes of an apprentice

The ancient workshop was one deeply embedded in medieval Guild societies throughout Europe. They were likened to a monastery. In fact many were deeply religious, even pious institutions where common-class families would send their sons to train under a respected professional craftsman. This became the surrogate home, as Richard Sennett puts it, for young boys to learn how to become competent male societal contributors and self-sufficient bread-winners. In these workshops, young men learned their place within a hierarchy where deftness was cherished and feebleness was met with violent repudiation. One entered with no skill, sweeping the floors and cleaning up after the other men. Humiliation was meant to break a spirit's ego, making a snotty boy humble and supple, pliant under a guided master's hand. "A father entrusted his sons to the master craftsman as a surrogate parent most notably by transferring the right to punish misbehavior with physical violence." [18]

The picture Sennett paints is a violent one. This is far from how a contemporary European workshop functions. While there are laws in place protecting the labourer from physical violence at the workplace, the violence of male hierarchy by way of the forced submission of a person's natural character are still practiced and enforced within the trades. I have often

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referred to my experience of working in the shoemaking factory as akin to being in the military. The company clothing we wear serves as a uniform, homogenizing our personality to serve the collective authority of management's vision of our character. From the point of arrival at work, individual personality is stripped of its uniqueness. Good ideas and innovations are discouraged among the common work floor. One must propose any improvements to a supervisor, who if he or she finds it of (subjective) interest, may decide to pass the idea upward to a higher-level manager. If it should be so lucky to make its way to the top and become approved, it may descend its way back into production implementation without much consideration of the originator's contribution. This makes it pointless for the originator to aim for innovation within the work practice. The person's efforts are rarely compensated and the hierarchy remains in place. With little room for the expulsion of classism, one becomes as Berardi put, "muted". A rebellious youth may try to break rank through acting out certain tendencies of behaviour. This behaviour might be looked upon by the superior as boisterous signs of bravery and candid humour, a recollection of his own adolescence. Once past certain rites of passage, not necessarily formal in any way but more to do with a maturing of skill, the skilled worker is promoted to the rank of a Journeyman. In Medieval Europe, these rites of passage where a young man obtained both life skill and crafted skill were obtained through traditions such as a German *Wanderjahre* or *Walz*. "*Auf der Walz sein*" refers to a period of 2-3 years, when a youth would leave his birth village, walking from town to town, seeking work and shelter, never once allowed to return home until that rite was complete.

A large difference between the life of a traditional craftsman's apprentice and the studio assistant is the subject of autonomy. A young craftsman who enters his *Wanderjahre* (wandering years) goes out into the world for a given period of time, fumbling from one unexpected situation to the next. He is encouraged to exercise his wild side, seeking adventure and all the while learning how to handle the basic principles of working class society: holding down a job, paying for what he needs, while gaining worldly insight. To his parental authorities back at home, it is no secret that his autonomy will broaden his perspective, but this freedom is meant to be contained to this period in his youth. Once returned, he is meant to fall back into the ordered life of the Guild. If he should step out of line at this point, he will be met with severe punishment from his master and disdain from most of his colleagues. His place in life is predestined. His only avenue to express his autonomy are through the minor artistic differences his hands wield, from that of another craftsperson.

A well-trained craftsperson is able to identify his or her own work immediately by sight. They can read the order which it was made, following a tell-tale of how it is 'meant' to be done, it is part knowing and following order, through a sequence of steps. This order is also metaphorical; a practice of learning how to follow rule. Should she or he not follow the sequence, the end is threatened by chaos. The craftsperson is trained to value harmony over chaos.



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### **The studio assistant**

The origins of the employment of studio assistants are uncertain, but many artists can be accredited to having had large studios with a number of workers administrating, researching and making their art, from Michelangelo to Rembrandt van Rijn and Olafur Eliasson. "Duchampian notions of mechanical reproduction reached full flower in the 1960s, when artists like Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg began silkscreening with helpers. The idea of art changed to be lesser about individual brushstrokes and more about the image, Paulson [Laura Paulson, Sr. Director of Christie's New York] says. Mechanical means expanded the artist's product. The studio assistant, who became almost an alter ego, enabled this process." [19] The artist assistant aims to both fulfill the duties of an artist while training and to aid in the facilitation of large, ambitious projects, such as in the concept of Andy Warhol's factory setting. The factory, requires an anonymity of its employees. In this way, the artist assisting in the making of a Warhol piece are asked to transfer personal skill to the ego of this single artist being represented. A trade-off may be for the studio assistant to learn the working practices of a particular favorable artist and gain easier entrance into a specific art world surrounding the more known artist.

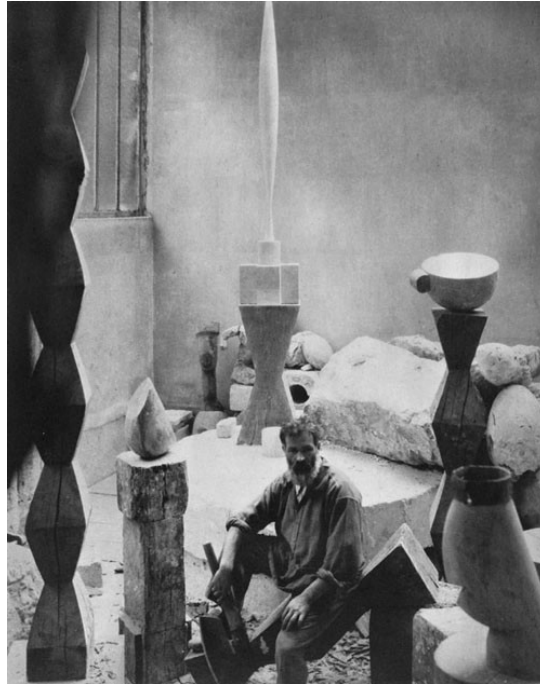
The role of the artist's assistant is assigned by the artist who conceptualizes and assigns the work, whether autonomous or commissioned. Techniques will be made just right; the way, or as close to the way how the master would make it them self. An ancient, spiritual ritual of transference is performed by the master and apprentice. As with ancient craftspeople, the artist and artist assistant pass on wisdom- a very personal wisdom. The role of the assistant is meant to be formative and one that will influence and encourage her or his own eventual autonomy.

Whereas autonomy is limited to a traditional apprentice's journeying years, autonomy is still viewed as an important position to most artists. This is a unique position particular to an artist, as the profession of an artist bridges all class backgrounds. Normally, this kind of autonomy is afforded by the ruling economic class, which is why it makes it more pressing to preserve within the arts.

### **Brancusi, the artist craftsman**

The body relates to material matter directly through all of its senses. We relate our self (as a projected form) to a material's weight, height, length, depth, gravity, spatial presence, aesthesis and history. These are the formal principles academic sculpture is based upon. The viewer walks around a sculpture and tests its physical nature against its own. Through this testing, a viewer can gauge the level of intimacy the sculptor had with the material. While intimacy is not a prerequisite in the making of art, it affects the quality of the viewer's connection to the work.

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Brancusi in his studio, circa 1928

Romanian-born sculptor, Constantin Brancusi, was the quintessence of both a craftsman and artist. He has been described in popular culture as the “pioneer of modernism” and the “patriarch of sculpture”. I find this a rather amusing term, given that he was an immigrant to France, especially compared to Daniel Buren’s sentiments towards authority. At night, he held a job as a dishwasher in a restaurant nearby to his house. Brancusi would go the studio by day and construct his stone and wooden forms. He studied the marble surface of his material, searching for a story through its veins and rough shape, until an image surfaced in his mind of what the piece would become. His conviction towards making his sculptures and their origin within the studio was so insoluble, that he had the Le Centre George Pompidou in Paris (who bought his oeuvre) guarantee that both space and sculptures remained intact as one symbiotic exhibition. They are a shrine to mastery; its white walls are filled with tools: saws, hand drills, chisels and hammers whose handles are worn by the labours of his palm. Raw wood, marble boulders and totemic columns of uplifting shapes fill the floor like the pillars of an ancient temple. Brancusi was an artist, who took craft to its furthest manifestation. His forms reach to grasp enlightenment and immortality. To Brancusi, art was his religion, craft was the discipline, and material was the source of gnosis.

"The 'matter' in this work, instead of hampering the 'soul', soars along with it, and thus remains present in the very action by which it is transcended. Brancusi so works the marble that its white veins become part of the sculpture itself, yielding winglike shapes on the right

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and left side. Above all, Brancusi's choice of material brings the stepped marble base into an 'intimate' relationship with the sculpture that it supports." [20]

It is this intimacy of craft which Friedrich Teja Bach describes in his essay, *Brancusi: The Reality of Sculpture*, that I have searched for by reviewing the works of Ader, Duchamp, Lewitt, Schwitters, Buren and Brancusi within this thesis.

The proliferation of irreproducible object making, a practice borrowed from autonomous art, is necessary in improving the quality of work life for labourers of factory goods. Is it a call to craftsmanship? In a way, yes, but not based on traditional values of the craftsman. Rather than aiming at perfectionism, the aim is variance. This variance includes a process of perfectionism, should the maker wish to strive for, but it is important to consider the maker may decidedly choose to make these objects of everyday use in a naïve way or with the acceptance of flaw. Such as the artwork, *Incomplete Cubes*, by Sol Lewitt, these production methods by the labourer make an alteration in the design and process of construction. This may include a process of amalgamating two different products together to form objects with hybrid usage. What is most important in this process of continuous autonomy in manufacturing, is that the authority of this process is superceded by the labourers. The maker must take charge in the destiny of the irreproducible object's evolution within the capitalist system. A labourers experience of work needs to shift from the "exhausted and muted body" as Berardi appropriately calls, to an emotive body. While I also agree with Berardi about re-calling our erotic body back from its numbed state which has been disassociated by factory assembly line production, an aim in the natural expression of the erotic body is still unsafe for female trade labourers on the job site. Female workers are often subject to sexual harassment on job sites. In an effort to avoid inappropriate sexual attention by men, often the erotic female body needs to temporarily close down as a form of protection. Therefore, I believe it is fundamental to begin with stimulating the emotive body. An emotive body is one that is empathic. This body is one who respects the internal fragility of every human, including him or herself. Society needs to break the tradition of encouraging psychologically and emotionally violent behaviour, and dominance amongst men on the work floor of the trade workshop is urgent to halt. The inception of an empathetic society is one that crafts its own senses.

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