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The new materiality: digital dialogues at the boundaries of contemporary craft

A nova materialidade: diálogos digitais nas fronteiras do artesanato contemporâneo

Fo Wilson

Resumo

Este estudo examina o trabalho de dezesseis artesãos estabelecidos e iniciantes envolvendo o trabalho com disciplinas tradicionais do artesanato ou com materiais que se apresentam como não-convencionais, por meio de tecnologias emergentes. Estes artesãos não são exceção quanto aos exemplos deste tipo de prática nos Estados Unidos, perpassando os limites disciplinares de sua prática profissional, construindo um novo terreno e ignorando os modelos tradicionais de categorização da prática do artesanato.

Palavras-chave

Estudos de materiais; mídias digitais; artesanato; contemporaneidade.

Abstract

This paper examines the work of sixteen established and emerging makers working within traditional craft disciplines or with traditional craft materials that are treading compelling territory between their mediums and emergent technologies. They are by no means alone and are but a sampling of practitioners in America that are bypassing the restraints of their given disciplines, forging new ground and ignoring conventional means of categorization.

Keywords

Material studies; digital media; craft; contemporaneity.

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1. Introduction

The title of my paper takes its name from a travelling exhibition I have curated, which is currently showing at the Fuller Craft Museum just outside of Boston, Massachusetts in the United States through February of next year. The exhibition, *The New Materiality: Digital Dialogues at the Boundaries of Contemporary Craft*, examines the work of sixteen established and emerging makers working within traditional craft disciplines or with traditional craft materials that are treading compelling territory between their mediums and emergent technologies. They are by no means alone and are but a sampling of practitioners in America that are bypassing the restraints of their given disciplines, forging new ground and ignoring conventional means of categorization. These makers are embracing technologies that are increasingly ubiquitous in the culture-at-large, and using them as new materials in their work. In addition, their work shows us how the lines between art, craft, and design, are becoming more porous as each area co-opts various theoretical, technical and philosophical aspects of the other, thus asking us to scrutinize the distance between them in contemporary creative work.

I am going to discuss the makers and some examples of the work in the exhibition, but ever so briefly, I'd like to frame my discussion around the question of where craft values have taken root in twenty-first-century American culture.

Some of the values that we typically assign to craft are: respect for the work and intelligence embodied in the hand and the handmade; virtuosity in technique and skill as represented in the well-made; honesty in materials and the maker's symbiotic relationship with them; beauty, although an elusive and subjective thing; a sustained sense of community; and the dignity and pride associated with labour that tie many occupations to a larger sense of humanity.

Richard Sennett, an American sociologist and author of the 2008 book, *The Craftsman*, underscores the value of community when discussing Linux code as a "public craft" and open knowledge system that he assigns, however far-fetched, to a twenty-first century example of craft. In this open source software community, computer programmers are constantly improving on the code, working together towards a common good, not competitively. In the world of the Linux programmer, change occurs daily as opposed to the several generations it used to take to invent or improve on the technology of say, a potter's wheel or a wood lathe.¹

The American Slow Food movement and the proliferation of D.I.Y. do-it-yourselfers – regardless of how much craft elites reject them – are an indication of a search for something meaningful to steer us towards a renewal of basic human values. Progressive farmers and cooks, D.I.Y. knitters and crafters seem to get it. This new "Slow Hand" Federation, as I call it, is trying to reenoble the hand whose provenance has been lost to a society way too preoccupied with balance sheets, an "I-want-it-now" mentality, and the perpetual desire and consumption of the new.

¹ Sennett's ideas were presented in his keynote address at The American Craft Council's 2009 Conference: Creating a New Craft Culture. For more see Sennett, Richard. *The Craftsman*. New York and London: Yale University Press, 2008. The podcast of his paper can be accessed at: http://www.craftcouncil.org/conference09/?page_id=1490, or from the Council's publication of the conference proceedings: <http://www.blurb.com/user/store/craftcouncil>.

Craft has something to offer a technologically orientated world, and new technologies provide novel fodder for makers and artists. I argue that digital technology is part of a *new materiality* in craft. New technologies are not displacing components of craft's heritage, but adding to them and enriching craft expression. In a smart phone enabled, Internet-happy, laptop culture, where digital objects and dynamic media have become embedded in the material culture of the modern world, it is no wonder that emergent technologies have increasingly attracted the interest of diverse makers and artists.

The exhibition, *The New Materiality*, poses a number of questions: If we were to consider digital matter—zeros and ones—a material like clay, glass, wood, metal, fiber or reed, does that force us to rethink traditional craft views within the “hand vs. the machine” debate relative to digital technology? If craft is endearingly tied to the skill of the hand, then how do we judge the skill with which a craft artist and maker uses digital technology and incorporates it into their work? How might these issues affect debates around the boundaries between art, craft and design? Should we redefine function in a post-modern context to include the viewer's experience of a given work beyond ordinary usefulness? What quandaries do these new technologies present to traditional makers and how do they reconcile these issues for themselves and in their work? *The New Materiality* seeks to answer some of these questions as a way to examine this phenomenon and assess its impact on contemporary craft and the American craftsman, thus providing us with new questions and proposing new answers about what craft is and what craft can be. What follows is a brief discussion of some of the work included in the exhibition.

2. Coding the human experience with fiber

Weaving is a binary language not unlike computer code. The warp and weft that weavers manipulate to devise unique aesthetic gestures in fibers, and the knit and purl stitches tendered in knitting, share a similar function with the zeros and ones that drive various forms of digital media.

Much of **Christy Matson's** work uses sound as a meeting ground between the analog and the digital. In the exhibition, Matson's *Soundw(e)ave* (2004), materializes the actual sounds of Jacquard looms represented from left, to right by: an entirely hand-operated loom, a computer assisted one, to the fully-automated industrial loom the piece was woven with. Drawing on everyday interactions with technology in her practice, yet somewhat suspicious of the social implications of our growing technological addictions, Matson in *Soundw(e)ave* creates a tangible and aesthetic representation of the path fiber and textile manufacturing has taken for us to reflect on. The patterns on the woven cotton—vis-à-vis the sound of the looms—get denser as the technology gets more automated. What does that say about human vs. technological resources, and the sensory vs. digital experiences that Matson is somewhat wary of?

Sonya Clark, fiber artist and Chair of the Craft/Material Studies Department at

Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Richmond, addresses hair as the first fiber and a cultural metaphor for “the struggle” as defined within African American culture, and constructs a portrait of the business icon Madame CJ Walker, America’s first female millionaire in *Madam CJ Walker (large)*, (2008). Walker made her fortune selling beauty products in the early 1900s to black women desperate to counter cultural notions of “bad” hair that found no recourse in the general marketplace. With the help of computer pixilation, Clark uses the positive lines of the comb and the negative space of missing teeth to compose a unique homage to this American icon.

In her video *The Important Thing*, (2005), Clark resurrects the old mnemonic device of tying a ribbon around a finger to remind us of how the busyness of modern life has endeared us to a constant cycle of endless activity. Reclaiming the hand itself as a mechanism of remembrance, Clark mimics the density of information we collect in our hand-held devices on one lone finger. The increasingly accelerated action in the video points out how trying to remember the “important things” has become such a challenge and that perhaps we should all slow down and take life one “thing” at a time.

Cat Mazza, who pursued an unusual educational path from studio art training at Goldsmiths College in London, Gender Studies at Carnegie Mellon, to a graduate degree in Electronic Arts at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, inserts a political agenda in combining digital animation with the aesthetic of the stitch, another example of binary mechanics. Her *microRevolt* video (2009), documents the *Nike Blanket Petition*, a project where international knitters and crochet hobbyists contributed 4” x 4” knitted and crocheted squares to the large blanket petition to encourage fair labour practices for Nike garment workers in sweatshops around the world. Her website microRevolt.org mediated social action, as knitters from forty countries signed the petition and sent in knitted squares.

Mazza’s contributions to this exhibit also include *Knitoscope Testimonies* (2009). Mazza created *Knitoscope*, a custom animation program that translates video into computer-generated knitted images. In *Testimonies*, activists working in the labour movement from organizations in San Francisco, Haiti and the Netherlands, testify to the politics of labour. Bringing together the voice of the activist and reviving a feminist vision of activism that at one time inspired the beginning of labour unions in the American textile industry, Mazza’s combination of the handmade and the technological, politicizes a dynamic knit and purl.

3. digital embodiments in glass

Two works by **Brian Boldon**, defy the visual logic that usually helps us understand visual information presented in the three-dimensional world. Boldon’s *Looking and Blindness*, (2006) and *3D Chair* (2010), offer a disorientating rethinking of physical embodiment in the new age.

New media theorists such as Mark Hansen connect the “new” in new media art to “... the refunctionalization of the body as a processor of information.”² A short walk through any public space, urban or rural a like, would bear witness to a culture that regard iPods as essential components and physical extensions of contemporary human anatomy. Boldon like Hansen, senses a new human experience that conjoins physical and virtual perception to create new art and objects that reflect artful experiences defined in a space between both physical and virtual embodiment. He uses imagery, optics, distortion and developing digital processes in ceramics and glass that relocate our usual sensory understanding of objects, and two and three-dimensional form.

In *Looking and Blindness*, the image of the eye is both projector and perceived receiver. In the work’s relationship to the viewer, the technology is virtually blind and the looking from the viewer’s point of view is an imaginary projection, thus giving credence to Hansen’s ideas of embodiment created at the intersections between the two. We also see this in an image of a 1940’s office chair fused to intersecting planes of glass in Boldon’s confoundingly deceptive work *3D Chair*. Boldon feels it “...reveals the oscillation between object, image, and material, folding actual and imagined experience together as a simultaneous event.”³

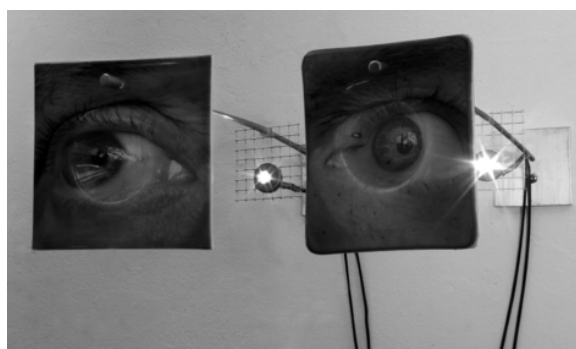


Figure 1 - Brian Boldon: *Looking and Blindness*, 2006. Kiln formed glass, aluminium, steel, digital glass prints, LEDs, 56” x 11” x 8”. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

4. Memory and identity in furniture forms

Donald Fortescue and **Lawrence LaBianca**, two San Francisco-based sculptors, evoke the American literary classic *Moby Dick* with *Sounding* (2008), originally created for a project where San Francisco Bay area artists were asked to produce work that specifically responded to the area’s physical, historical and social environment. Fortescue and LaBianca constructed a cabriole-legged table, filled it with beach rocks, lowered it in the ocean for two months and recorded the sounds via hydrophone near where the table was submerged. For exhibition, they constructed an oversized hailing horn-like funnel made of laser-cut polycarbonate connected with zip ties to amplify the recorded sound. This original and imaginative work provides a meeting ground between eighteenth and twenty-first century form, materials, and techniques. It brings together ideas that traverse different time periods in unique ways that speak to the porous territory between art, craft and design, as well as the relationships between humans, technology and nature. The hailing horn animates the memory of the table’s habitation in water, while the artists conjure primal forces using water, sound and the mythology of white sperm whale. Fortescue’s and LaBianca’s *Sounding*, successfully integrates aspects of art, craft, and design that offer a magnificent sensory and visual experience of dramatic scale.

² Mark B. N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004, p. 22).

³ As quoted, from Boldon’s artist statement, 2009.

Originally trained as a painter, **Shaun Bullens** graduated in 2007 from the Rhode Island School of Design’s Furniture program after completing training

in eighteenth and nineteenth-century furniture making at the North Bennet Street School in Boston. The school, which has been operating since 1885, is committed to continue training and teaching traditional woodworking skills. In *Anxious* (2007), Bullens combines a fine-furniture elegance with electronics and digital media that address issues of anxiety and personal space. A parakeet named *Bird* that appears captive in its cage, suddenly takes virtual flight and assumes freedom on a tree limb close by that is emerging from a small table made with carved cabriole legs. The maker asks: are we caged or are we protected: are we free or are we tethered? If so, then tethered to what?

5. Jewelry as virtual adornment

Nineteen-eighties excesses pale in comparison to recent times. A memorable figure of nineteen-eighties extravagance was Imelda Marcos, the widow of the former Philippine president, who allegedly owned 3000 pairs of shoes! Another object of her excessive lavishness, was her extraordinarily expensive jewelry collection. Roving the Internet for her ruby necklace with diamonds, and other examples of iconic jewelry such as the *Hope Diamond*, designers **Mike and Maaike** found images of these and other expensive pieces and recreated them as a part of their *Stolen Jewels* series (2007). At a distance these pieces sparkle and read as what they are: big, flashy, “look-a-me” knockouts. Closer examination reveals low-res images taken from *Google’s* image search engine—something that many of us use everyday—that were doctored and transferred to scored leather. Mike, a native Californian, and Maaike originally from the Netherlands, work in San Francisco and share a collaborative practice that mixes low-tech and high-tech traditions of craft and industry to create objects with unique commentary on the human condition. *Stolen Jewels* questions how we value contemporary objects. The “jewels,” stripped of their objective value, are left with their perceived value—the *bling*—a modern component of contemporary commodified exchange.

6. Artist Websites

Christy Matson: <http://www.cmatson.com/>

Sonya Clark: <http://www.sonyaclarke.com/>

Cat Mazza: <http://www.microrevolt.org/>

Brian Boldon: <http://www.brianboldon.com>

Donald Fortescue: <http://donaldfortescue.com/portfolio/>

Lawrence LaBianca: <http://lawrencelabianca.com/>

Shaun Bullens: <http://www.shaunbullens.com>

Mike & Maaike: <http://www.mikeandmaake.com>

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