

Theories of Making

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[Title Slide] We will begin this session with a reading of a paper that we have jointly authored, and which is the result of discussion we have had over several years, as well as more recent phone conversations and email communications. As the theme of “Making” is central to this conference, we began with the fundamental questions of how the process of making informs the meaning of a work of art, as well as how art is taught. To frame the inquiry we first consider a number of ideas related theories of making that inform contemporary attitudes and practice.

[Kant] While ideas about the role and preparation of the artist have changed over time and are culturally prescribed, it may be helpful to look to the aesthetic philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant asserts that art relies on native talent, and is different from knowledge, which involves some kind of practical ability that is teachable. Additionally, he distinguishes art from labor or craft - the latter being something satisfying only for the payoff that results and not for the mere activity of making itself. For Kant, art is free from any interest in the existence of the product itself.

This begs the question of how we define knowledge; Kant locating knowledge as a left-brain/conscious activity that does not include knowledge learned in haptic modes that, at least initially, bypass the rational mind. Kant’s definition of knowledge dominated our approach to western education for a good part of the 20th century and is still echoed in the call for “back-to-basics” or a philosophy that asserts that we must “know the rules before we can break them.”

[BauHaus] Kant's 18th century aesthetics inform much subsequent art theory which tends to disassociate art from the process of making. The architect and founder of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius, asserted that making artists was a problem, insisting that art is not a "profession which can be mastered by study"; it "cannot be taught and can not be learned," even if the "manual dexterity" of the craftsman can and must." While Gropius's equation makes technical skill necessary to the practice of art, it also asserts a separation of art from technique. Art is that which escapes teaching; technique, is that which can be taught, and is destined to become 'merely' technique. This contention that the only feasible outcome of teaching in art is limited to skill development is a belief that has sustained itself to this day as seen in contemporary writings such as James Elkins' *Why Art Cannot be Taught* or Howard Singerman's *Art Subjects* (We'll talk more on this phenomenon later)

(Walter Gropius, "The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus," in *Bauhaus, 1919-1928*, ed. Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, and Ise Gropius (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938, p. 23)

[Dada] Kant's ideas not only inform Gropius's teaching philosophy, but provide a context for considering the evolution of art practice in the 20th century. In the examples of Dada, Surrealism, Duchamp, abstract expressionism and minimalism, artists increasingly pushed the boundaries of what could be conceived as art, and by extension what could be considered artistic labor. **[FluxKit]** Movements and approaches such as Fluxus, conceptual art, process art and performance art often privileged idea over execution, or more accurately, created a different proposition as to what constitutes an art-making process.

[Fountain] It is worth considering the implications of Duchamp's "readymades" for contemporary art practice and education. In the recently published interviews between Calvin Tompkins and Marcel Duchamp in the 1960s, the artist talks about the risks that readymades represent for art practice. One of the things that appealed to Duchamp about the elaborate valise projects was the ways that **[Valise]** techniques of reproduction served to reanimate his works, and reinserted a level of craft into their production and reception. Despite this, historians of 20th century art tend to consider Duchamp's valises as a secondary

aspect of his art production, in part because they do not easily fit the theoretical narrative they have constructed around the ready-mades. This promotion of the idea itself as the locus of artistic genius was further solidified by the emergence of conceptual art in the late 1960s through about 1972. The legacy of that art-historical moment is the hierarchy that gives primacy to idea that is sustained to this day.

This often becomes a conundrum for the visual artist of any stripe; when the dominant theoretical conversation does not encompass the particular artistic practice of an individual. For example, the disregard of narrative art during the hey-day of abstract expressionism was inverted as a critical mass of artists continued addressing the narrative/representational works (albeit with a renewed scrutiny of what narrative means) . The caution is to be wary of trends, but the challenge lies in sustaining a critical dialog that is meaningful to the art that one makes. This becomes a particular challenge to those of us whose disciplines fall outside of the mainstream of contemporary critical discourse.

[Brushes] In response, many college level visual art courses abandoned traditional approaches to teaching, resulting in various forms of “de-skilling.” Emphasis was often placed on letting students “discover themselves” in the absence of a systematic overview of processes and materials, or questions of how to make art were considered secondary to theoretical or conceptual reasons for why to make art. As R. I. Duffus asserted in 1928, “Once or twice in a generation a genius will appear – and if the school helps him, even to the extent of teaching him how to mix his paints or clean his brushes, it may have justified the grief, the cost, the waste of what is admittedly a haphazard scheme of education.”

R. I. Duffus, *American Renaissance*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928, page 187-88.

[Printing] In contrast to this development, printmaking, like a number of craft disciplines has generally remained committed to its historical traditions of skill acquisition, and often its reputation as fine art has suffered within the hierarchies of the art world. While more recently there has been a return to a highly crafted aesthetic in art, the conventional view of the artist whose authority is solely defined by the virtuosity of technique no longer

applies. The relationship between creativity and production has broadened and with this expansion raises questions familiar to the print community about authorship, artistic originality, skill, craftsmanship and the creative act. A response in the teaching of printmaking is not to refute the importance of idea, but to explore multiple paths of ideation that perhaps bypass the Kantian fore-brain and embrace the haptic and intuitive modes of knowing that accrue through an engagement with process.

[Becker] As anyone who has read Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* knows, from a sociological perspective the work of any individual artist is bound up with larger systems that make the work of any given individual possible. Sociologically, the answer is never "I made it," but "we made it." It is not only the integrated professional who is connected to these systems, from schools and universities, to Fed Ex and UPS, but the self taught art who is reliant on the hardware store for paint or brushes. Our own capacity to make art is contingent on many conditions established in the society at large.

[Betty Crocker] In a world where consumption and production overlap, one may look to food preparation for useful analogies. While most printmakers may prize knowledge of materials and processes, few of us make our ink or paper from scratch. Instead, we rely on a consistent source of inks and papers from the vendors attending this conferences product fair. Consider the example of Betty Crocker box cake mixes, which could have included powdered egg and milk substitutes, but leave out the eggs so that the person using their cake mixes feels as though they have actually made the cake. **[Grilling]** Similarly, a campfire grill at Frogman's last summer is a collection of commercially made protein sources that are capable of being put on a stick. Most of the "making" with this process involved the making of the fire, and the selection and modification of the stick.

[China Factory] Theories of Making also address issues of human labor and the concept of work. We often think of ourselves as living in an information age, and while this may be true, the hands of real people assemble the smart phones or notebook computers that we use to

access this information. **[China Factory]** 2011 data indicate that for smaller stuff we purchase — food, clothes, gas, etc. — 76 percent of personal spending goes to goods made in the U.S., and 6 percent goes to goods made in China. When you include big ticket items such as houses, cars and boats, this number of 6 percent goes down to only 3%. However, it is a very important 3%, because, as we know from our own studio practices that many innovations come from the process of working. They are discovered through experience, not *a priori*.

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/2011/08/10/139388532/only-a-tiny-silver-of-americans-personal-spending-goes-to-china>

<http://www.fastcoexist.com/1678407/only-3-of-what-you-buy-is-made-in-china-but-its-the-most-important-3>

[China Paper] In 2007 we both spent a month in China as part of Minna Resnick’s San Bao delegation. In a land that we often associate with the production of low cost manufactured goods, we visited papermaking villages, **[China Tiles]** ceramic roof tile factories and a factory where wooden doors were carved. It was also a time of the year when everyone in the villages was at work putting in the rice plants, sometime in fields prepared behind oxen. **[China Carving]** While the trans-Pacific cargo container has changed what people in China make, it is also important to remember that their local industries, ones that date back centuries, and which are inherently sustainable, offer a context for the plastic and electronic goods that are made for export to the rest of the world.

[China Portfolio] During our trip to China we discussed the possibility of working on an exchange portfolio about our trip. While in Jingdezhen, China we made inquiries to a local manufacturer who could make 21 boxes to our specifications. After seeing a prototype, they made all of the boxes in only 2 days at the cost of only \$6 each. Just procuring the supplies for these boxes would cost more in the United States.

[Work Ethic] One insightful exhibition that addressed the issue of artistic labor is Helen Molesworth’s *Work Ethic* presented at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2003. From the introduction Molesworth writes “After WWII, the basis of the United States economy shifted

from manufacturing to service, transforming traditional definitions of labor. As the conditions of labor changed for the vast majority of American populace, so too did it change for artists. Many artists (like their working and professional counterparts) no longer felt compelled to offer a discrete object produced by hand. Rather, they explored ways of producing art that were analogous to other forms of labor. Art could thus be made with unskilled manual labor, with highly regimented managerial labor, or with labor that resonated with ideas borrowed from the service economy.”

[Honest Labor] Molesworth’s exhibition included documentation of Chris Burden’s project “Honest Labor” from 1979, for which the artist dug a 2½ foot wide x 3 foot deep trench, starting at 9am until 5pm. **[Time Piece]** Similarly, the Taiwanese artist Tehching Hsieh conducted Time Piece,” a one year performance in 1980-81 for which he punched a time clock every hour, on the hour. In an economy that is so dominated by service industries, both of these examples raise questions regarding the intersection between doing and making. Here labor exists *as* the concept and a means to raise political awareness through process as opposed to labor as a means to an aesthetic end. Burden’s work still is “just a ditch”; its artistic merit lies outside of the aesthetic.

[LOU] Contrast this with the work of artists such as Liza Lou whose installation Kitchen involved covering every square inch of the surfaces with tiny beads. Or in the medium of print, **[Donovan]** Tara Donovan. This is one of her prints that is made by printing the edges of rubber bands. In both of these, the palpable painstaking labor of its making is part of the authority of the aesthetic end product.

[Printshop] Of course we think of work as having its own rewards. Work has worth – not just economic or monetary value. We live in a culture of (often passive and unconscious) consumption, students value print media because it empowers them with a specific set of skills to make an impact on their culture, often applying the same tools used in large-scale production. Industrialization, which is responsible for most of what makes up our lived

environment, typically reflects labor practices that separate design and production.

Printmaking changes this paradigm, giving artists (such as Donovan) control over both the means of design and systems of production.

[DIY] Consistent with 1960s counter cultural initiatives and more recent DIY and concepts of “craftivism,” there is a growing interest in skill acquisition and the potential for building learning communities around skill acquisition. **[Stewart]** The commercial success of the Martha Stewart enterprise of magazines and television shows is to a great extent a reflection of this popular desire to create, to work with your hands. **[Printshop]** The appeal of printmaking for many students may be that it enhances their skill set, giving them knowledge of specific materials and processes. The more things you know how to make, the better-prepared one will be for a creative life in the future. In addition, having a specific set of skills can help to prepare one for learning new skills after school.

[PDD: DIY] We might ask what particular challenge does this attitude pose to the teaching of printmaking? Where does the idea of transferable skill come in to the practice of teaching? What are the transferable skills? Creative thinking (thinking aside, through metaphor as opposed to linear thinking – repurposing, affordance, etc.) Actual skills – how to pull a squeegee makes good T-shirt printers - are not to be underestimated as a component of a possible enterprise, but not, as I think we agree, the sole or primary determinant of quality.

[Castleman-Brooklyn National] Of course not everyone has regarded printmaking as a valuable field of study. For a panel session held in 1979 in conjunction with the “National Print Exhibition, 21st Biennial” held at the Brooklyn Art Museum, Riva Castleman, Curator of Prints and Illustrated Books at the Museum of Modern Art made the assertion **[Quote]** “I do not see printmaking – and never have – as a way of working out the basic problems of art. It’s too fraught with other technical problems.” Castleman further asserted that young artists should study painting and drawing, and only pursue printmaking with a reputable publisher

after they had achieved a “mature style.” At its core, Castleman argued for outsourcing print production to specially trained craftsmen.

And we don’t entirely dismiss that this is a route for some artists. In Michael Petry’s recent book *The Art of Not Making: The New Artist/Artisan Relationship*, Maurizio Cattelan provocatively asserts “The idea that the artist manipulates materials is not something I agree with. I don’t design. I don’t paint. I don’t sculpt. I absolutely never touch my works.” Artists who embrace their own craftskill as an essential part of identity chafe at this kind of remark because it reinforces an art/craft hierarchy that discounts the contribution of craft to the essential quality of the finished work. Petry rightly notes however that the questions of authorship “rarely arise in other fields of cultural activity. In film, for instance, there is no doubt where the authorship of a movie lies... the director is credited as the person who ‘made’ the film (yet)...People generally understand the collaborative process of making a movie, and do not discount the work of many others involved.”

[YoYo Ma] And what about the concert musician, whose virtuosity of technique *is* the locus of artistic genius? Yo Yo Ma did not write, but interprets work written by a composer, but in this case, the technical virtuoso is the headline. The problem with Castleman’s assertion is that it is an absolute decree, that assumes nothing is to be gained from grappling with technical skill and process.

[Singerman] Twenty years after Castleman’s assertion about print education, Howard Singerman makes an additional case against technical education in his book *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*. **[Quote]** Singerman writes that “Certain individually practiced and historically bound media – printmaking, for example, or ceramics – have functioned less well as disciplines: as art in general or as criticism in the place painting once was. There is, perhaps, too much to teach, too specific and material a body of knowledge to learn to produce an image and, it seems the more teacherly the medium, the less readily its

technical practices transform into theoretical questions, and the less historical difference is written in them.” (p. 200)

While Singerman’s assertion that graduate education necessitates an engagement with theory has merit, the characterization of printmaking and ceramics as being too teacherly to foster a theoretical practice is inherently flawed. A theory of making that dislodges the antecedent “mere” from the word “craft” insists that the problems of technique cannot be of intrinsic value of the creative process. Artists working in craft traditions can be concerned with both the how and why of making.

[CCA] Castleman and Singerman both display a bias against learning craft traditions as part of the education of artists, because learning technical and craft traditions are considered to be contrary to either artistic or theoretical advancement. Consider the decision by the California College of Arts and crafts to drop the word “Crafts” from its name.

And yet, these biases contain some facets of truth are part of the challenge that print educators face. Students’ preconception that the class is built around the acquisition of specific technique as transferable skill, or critical discourse that separates idea from process subvert our insistence that printmaking is indeed relevant in the broader context of art making practice. The essential challenge of print education hinges then on a theory of making.

[Quote] Ed Levine essentially makes this point in his 1982 *Art Journal* article “**Vision and it’s Medium**, where he writes, “Theoretical questions raised by a discipline become important sources of ideas which can extend and enlarge the medium because they provide a metacritical viewpoint. There is a sense in which the discipline is larger than any of its manifestations as a medium, where it can direct the attention of the artist as well as being directed by the artist.”

Ed Levine, "Vision and it's Medium," *Art Journal*, Volume 42, number 1 (Spring 1982), page 49.

[Quisling] Castleman's remarks about print education can be rebutted on several levels. As Fran Myers made evident in her 1992 CAA conference session "Are Printmakers the Quislings of the Art World?" Quisling was the puppet pro-Nazi ruler in Norway during WWII who betrayed his country. Myers' session considered if many artists school as printmakers found success working in a more broadly defined practice, often later denying the impact of their printmaking studies. Her session argued that the technical demands of printmaking did not inhibit their development, but the serial and sequential aspects of the printmaking informed their subsequent art. It can also be argued that more recent approaches to teaching print media that stress variable editions and monoprints helps the student artist to take advantage of the repeatable image to create visual and conceptual variations that accelerate their artistic development.

[Gladwell] Repetition, often characteristic of craft based education has value to the artistic development of a student. In *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell argues for the importance of time spent to achieve greatness, citing the "10,000 Hour Rule" based on a study by Anders Ericsson. In contrast, an ethos of deskilling separates thinking from making, and often results in outsourcing cultural production or places value on amateurism. This separation of conception and production disregards the value of discovery that comes from direct and long-term empirical investigations of processes and materials. On larger scales of production, outsourcing production also results in questionable ethical outcomes for workers and the environment. Making most of the things we use on the other side of the planet is not sustainable.

[Crawford] Two interesting new books address issues of making to the creative process. Both Matthew B. Crawford's *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry Into the Value of Work* and Jonah Lehrer's *Imagine: How Creativity Works*, argue for values that printmakers know from firsthand experience, that working with materials and processes in a shop setting requires

intelligence, and involves the full attention of both the mind and body. Matthew B. Crawford, who owns and operates a motorcycle repair shop in Richmond, Virginia argues that expertise with things permits people to have agency over their lives, to repair the plumbing, electrical outlets and small engines that we rely on daily. Crawford argues that advocates of the knowledge economy have posited a false dichotomy between knowing and doing.

[Lehrer] Similarly, Jonah Lehrer, who uses many examples of creative thinking from the realms of science and technology, argues for material investigations as part of the creative process. He notes that “Johannes Gutenberg transformed his knowledge of wine presses into an idea for a printing machine capable of mass-producing words,” offering a case for how the tool skills used in one context have value in another. In *Imagine: How Creativity Works* Lehrer also makes a case for how the social aspects of a working environment foster creative thinking, a concept which is central to the organization of any effective printshop.

[Quote] The problem facing the discipline of printmaking, and by implication the teaching of printmaking, lies in how the element of skill or craft is perceived as a dimension of the art being made. How can the work ethic and labor that is associated with printmaking processes be parlayed in to an attribute of the work’s authority? As the artist Ed Levine wrote in the *Art Journal* in 1982 “It is through the development of theoretical issues that a medium becomes a discipline... otherwise it will be relegated to the status of craft

Ed Levine, “Vision and it’s Medium,” *Art Journal*, Volume 42, no. 1 (Spring 1982), page 49.

[Chagoya] As a case in point, the IMPACT 2 international printmaking conference held in 2001 in Helsinki, Finland addressed material aspects of printmaking as the theme of the conference. Printmaking, which has often been labeled as being only concerned with technique, has also sought to articulate the meaning of its processes and materials. Being attentive to the histories of the discipline and the capacity for any component of technique or process to carry or inform meaning opens many facets of creative inquiry that depend on the identification with printmaking. Consider an artist such as Enrique Chagoya. When he makes intaglios that

reference Francisco Goya's "Caprichios" or "Disasters of War," his chosen technique informs the meaning of the resulting prints. **[Vollmer Woodcut]** Similarly, a North American artist using woods native to her homeland, but with Japanese *ukiyo-e* printing techniques is imbedding issues of the local and global into the material structure of her practice. **[Iwinski]** Or consider these works by artist Mark Iwinski, where the woodcut matrix is in fact a cross-section of ancient trees is in fact the point of the work. In this respect, technique as expressed through materials and processes does not replace artistic concept, but informs or becomes it. **[Wilson]** Another favorite for brilliant integration of process and concept is the work of Fred Wilson done at Crown Point Press. In a series of works done in 2004, he collected snippets of dialog of black characters from various books written by white authors. The black spots (created through a spit-bite) become the characters "speaking" the recontextualized text fragments in new conversations that ultimately serve to stand for a renegotiation of black identity from an internal source rather than the surrounding culture. For Wilson, the plate-making process- using acid to burn the marks in to the plate- was conceptually relevant to the socio-political agenda. His labor of collecting and re-combining the text fragments stand as an example of individual effort required to change cultural assumptions. The fact that the images exist as prints extend this "ownership" of the problem and invites anyone who sees the work to question their own complicity or to accept the call to be an agent of change.

[Printshop] Recognizing the value of haptic forms of learning, we need to re-cast our understanding of how we address the teaching of technique. Can we have greater impact on a student's understanding of their own creative process if we advocate a conscious consideration of the affordances of print processes? If idea and process are presented as integrally linked components of creative problem-solving, students can be liberated from a "right or wrong" duality as far as process is concerned. If accepted as normative, technical parameters exist as soft boundaries available for creative intervention.

[Print Demo] Thorough instruction in processes and materials involves not only introducing students to this history and science of these methods, it requires showing examples of original prints, preferably reflecting a broad range of artistic sensibilities using these methods that link craft and concept. Most importantly, the technical demonstration needs to be more than a handout and a presentation. Too often, technical handouts function as “prosthetic knowledge,” disembodied from the experience of the student. While technical hand-outs may have a place in the demonstration, the core value of the demonstration is to involve students in the making of a work of art. Demonstrations also should equip students with body knowledge, giving them an opportunity to participate in the demonstration by learning first-hand how to handle a brayer or roller, how best to grip a squeegee and the amount of force needed, and how dampen a stone. These hands-on experiences help the student to internalize the learning.

[Tinkering Tully] If we accept the proposition that creative opportunity exists within any technical process, then we must also embrace the importance of “failure” as a dimension of discovery. To paraphrase Gever Tully, founder of the Tinkering School, our goal should be to “empower students with a basic knowledge of how (print) things work and imbue in them the deep internal realization that you can figure stuff out by “fooling around.” In many respects this approach is consistent with an approach to teaching in the natural sciences that is looking to the studio classroom model as a more effective teaching approach than the lecture/lab model.

<http://www.unm.edu/~oset/Event%20Descriptions/LearningStudioClassroomsatUNM.html>

[Print Demo] The rhetorical question that emerges from this pedagogical framework is about how to actually convey technical information. In addition to considering theories of making, both of us will offer some strategies that educators in studio and design courses can employ to give students greater command of materials and processes while connecting this learning to their formal and theoretical development. We both advocate for an approach to teaching

technique that involves demonstrating materials and processes in ways that are descriptive rather than prescriptive. But what are the practical concerns (with safety or potential damage to equipment, for instance) that require non-negotiable procedural rules with regard to process? This is often where the “know the rules before you break them” theory stands its ground. What is ‘enough’ technical information that allows for safety and property protection while allowing the discovery that arises out of not-knowing and a pedagogical approach (supported by the science that Lehrer cites) that suggests that a failure/recovery cycle actually improves learning. Can we find a short-cut through this that intentionally expects, even asks students to fail a certain percentage of time? Do we, as the teacher become the technical collaborator (at least at first) so that students discover art-making through process rather than process first, then application? What does this mean as to how we structure our assignments and communicate goals? Integrating formal and conceptual development into lesson plans also necessitates setting other criteria, ones that are often informed by readings, exhibitions or other resources in the development of project objectives.

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