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Abstract

Imagine constructing a clay vessel by whispering its form into the ear of the potter. The resulting vessel—a translated thing—would exist in the world as a sort of object-thought. Something made from nothing, from the firing of neurons, from the brush of one's mouth against the ear of another, the passing of language from one mind to another. In long-distance collaboration we exchange our crude energy through subtle pathways, through the ether of digital networks in order to bring matter into existence, objects from thought. Skill, like all information in the digital era, shows itself as a force that desires fluidity, boundlessness and the complex generosity of the open source. Collectively written, this text outlines a terrain of thought; it is an open-ended meditation on matter and making, data and digital space, and the ways our own collaboration has learned to move within them.

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Craft Mystery Cult

Craft Mystery Cult, composed of Sonja Dahl (USA/Indonesia), Jovencio de la Paz (Chicago), and Stacy Jo Scott (Oakland), is a collective effort born from our desire for haptic making. Established in 2010, Craft Mystery Cult has produced exhibitions, performances, and texts that engage the communal impulse and ritual connectivity inherent to many craft processes.

Sonja Dahl moves between the USA and Indonesia, making research, artwork, and written work. She focuses primarily on issues of collectivity in both countries' contemporary arts, as well as indigo dye production and its social history. Jovencio de la Paz is an artist and faculty member in the Department of Fiber and Material Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where his current work and research deals with Batik and its narrative possibilities. Stacy Jo Scott, engaged with digital forms of fabrication and ceramics, uses a variety of both ancient and emergent technologies to meditate on the interstitial space between materiality, spirituality and embodiment.

Collectively written, this text outlines a terrain of thought; it describes a territory that, for us, has no definitive center. We seek to reflect on our experience with collaboration, craft, the digital, and the haptic in an open and meditative way.

Fraught Connections

As individuals engaged in forms of production that include weaving, ceramics, and other haptic practices, we have always been drawn to the ways in which craft and crafted things have the capacity to link humans together both metaphorically and physically. When a cup or a bowl enters the world, it passes through many hands over its lifetime. Beginning with its maker, every subsequent user adds to the narrative of that object's trek through the world. The role of touch extends far beyond the act of making. The maker's touch, the touch that most often occupies us in the discourse of the handmade, is only the first in what is often a long story of touch. Objects have the potential to become long records of hands. In general, a cup or bowl may touch many lips in its life, a quilt may cover many sleeping bodies—yet over the course of time, both quilt and cup are changed, drawn away from the ideal state generated by the maker. Users collaborate with the maker in a protracted manipulation of the object. At times, the essential gravity of a well-made

Figure 1
Sewing the Surface of the Water, 2011.

thing comes from the fact that it has been well loved. The user's touch may one day outshine the maker's touch, and any object, handmade or not, can be subject to the special illumination of a body's contact. It is sometimes hard to throw out a loved one's shirt, not because of any significance placed there by the maker, but because of an inexplicable and fundamental energy left in the object by the life of the user. Every individual collaborates in a slowly accreting identity of all their things, whether they are consciously aware of it or not. If we begin to think about all the objects of our daily lives in this manner, a poetics appears, one that is connective and alive.

In the theatre of the digital, the issue of connectivity has other implications in our shared practice as craftspeople and humans. The three of us have struggled with connectivity, since the difficulty of distance currently resides at the heart of our collective. We have decided to make our homes far apart, on the shores of Lake Michigan, on the coast of California, and on the equatorial expanse of Indonesia. To work together at such a distance, to occupy a studio that spans literally half the globe, we have confronted both the limitations and potentialities of telecommunication and of virtuality. In the international and decentralized location of our three-part collaborative effort, we exchange ideas digitally, through Skype conference calls and emails, in Google Docs and in image files that travel the lines of the Internet, to and fro. At first, this way of working seems antithetical to the hands-on, corporeal nature of craft. Describing shapes of bowls or textures of surfaces or the subtle color of things is easy to do when we are all present in the workshop and we can handle the objects in question, but this poses challenges over the Internet. We have been forced to stretch our language, rely on video and jpegs to give life to our textual exchanges. At first a hindrance, now we do not see these methods of collaboration in the digital arena simply as necessities or practicalities. Rather, we see the digital space of collaboration as a vital studio space, one with nuanced vernacular, process, and texture unique to it alone—we mine these particular qualities, and we see the digital realm and digital collaboration as essential for all kinds of makers to consider in this current technological moment.

The Internet has presented us with more nuanced definitions of presence and of absence. In the shared space of the physical, we must think of the bodies of our collaborators, the way they occupy space and the way they move as they work. But now, in each of our empty studios scattered around the globe, we see each other's glowing faces from computer screens like apparitions. FaceTime and Skype and Google compress the

Figure 2
A Setting for Rituals Involving Indigo, 2012.

distances between us into an infinitesimally thin, digital membrane. Do the live streams of information that represent our faces and our voices tell more of our absence or more of our presence? Do they take something away from the supposed authenticity of the physical, of embodied presence?

When the very basic act of communication, so vital to every form of collaboration, must be magnified by digitizing it, we confront language in a fundamentally altered way. In the unique space of a Google Document for example, the production of language differs from a physical encounter, even from telecommunications. In a Google Document language through text occurs on the screen

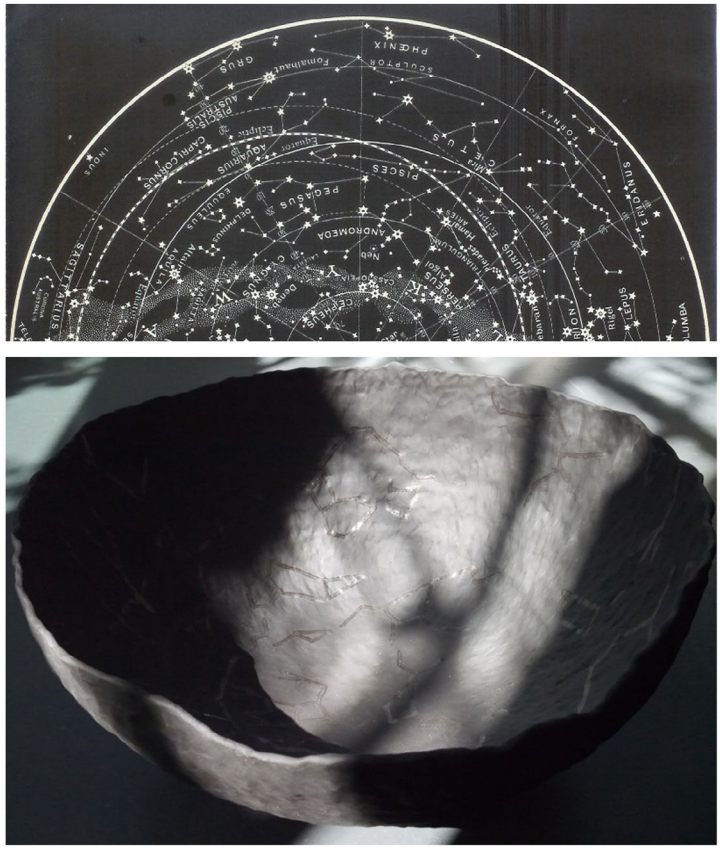

Figure 3
A Setting for Leo, Lynx, Cassiopeia, and Camelopardalis, 2013.

Figure 4
A Setting for Rituals Involving Indigo, photo by PD Rearick, 2012.

Figure 5
A Setting for Rituals Involving Indigo, 2012.

in fluid simultaneity, a polyphonic discourse that does not evolve linearly but in a multidirectional matrix of thought. But this is not a fully utopian vision of the communicative potential of the virtual. Moments of lag and asynchronicity become moments of surprise. The errant behaviors of this new form of communication are not simply interruptions, but radical intercedents, moments of reflection on the very process of producing thought and producing language. The screen freezes, we fall out of synchronicity. Moments later, jumbled text speeds across the screen. The new vernacular of craft includes such digital processes of collaboration and communication, not as replacements for old forms of discussion, but as a new texture of production.

A phrase or two dropped from Skype can become a generative moment of miscommunication, one that sends us on a tangent that leads us to new ideas. You say "a *hole* in the sky" and I hear "a *bowl* in the sky" and in a split second an entire body of work emerges. Strangely, it is this imperfect nature of digital communication that is rich. When the smoothness of digital communication is interrupted, because of shaky connectivity in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, perhaps, we have something akin to a bodily experience, a *hiccup* in every sense of the word. The Internet is not perfect, like the human body, and each parallels the other in this way. In craft, the human hand is always fallible and it is this fallibility that lends a handmade thing its warmth. What is the Internet's warmth? In what manner does the Internet touch? The glitch is a nuance, a sudden reminder of the imperfect digital, as Hito Steyerl has discussed in her text *In Defense of the Poor Image*. These moments slow the process of communication; these moments force us to reiterate our ideas. Such impediments inform rather than detract from our process of designing a textile or an entire exhibition, for example.

There is also a metaphoric component to this process of digital communication, and when applied to the larger arc of our practice, it bears an unexpected beauty. As we work together through virtual structures, our digitized communications become translated by our physical bodies into objects, handmade and flawed, which go on to travel physically through spaces like galleries and museums. For our exhibition as part of *Object Focus: the Bowl* at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland, Oregon, we began by discussing the shape and color of a bowl. We made sketches, shared scans, and wrote emails about this bowl. This

matrix of emails and jpegs was brought into physical reality as a ceramic object, made by one of us while in residency in Colorado. Those of us who had never touched this bowl saw it only online, so the bowl remained largely in a virtual space. To consider this touchless way of making is, for us, not simply an act of outsourcing. It is an extremely intimate communication. Imagine constructing a clay vessel by whispering its form into the ear of the potter. The resulting vessel is both familiar and unfamiliar, a translated thing. Our ideas are passed between realms both tangible and intangible, embodied and disembodied. In Javanese *Kejawen* philosophy, the mind belongs to the physical realm, the realm of matter, emotions and thinking, of tangible experience—it is crude energy. We exchange our crude energy through subtle pathways, through the ether of invisible networks in order to bring matter into existence, objects from thought.

Skill and its Mutable Sites

We like to think that we each bring specificity to our collaboration. We each have skills the others do not. As craftspeople we have a penchant to think that skill exists only within the mysterious place of the hands and the body, embedded somehow, inexorable from our identities as physical beings. We think of our skills as unique. We think of skills as our own. Yet we also each represent a long and unbroken chain of haptic knowledge, starting in the unimaginable past in the hands of a select few primary makers, nurtured and refined throughout history, inhabiting our bodies in the present. In this light, we find it increasingly difficult to lay claim to skill. In a sense, each new body that learns to throw a pot on the wheel, to wind a warp, to mix indigo, embodies the gestures of countless makers that have come before. Skill is alive in this way, permeating each individual who engages with it. In its aliveness, skill evolves, and tends towards sharing.

There are countless craft communities that have established themselves around the mutual sharing and investigation of specific skills. Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington, The Haystack Mountain School of Craft in Deer Isle, Maine, the Penland School of Crafts in Bakersville, North Carolina, even the former Black Mountain College or the Bauhaus schools fall under this category. These communities of makers have many names: guilds and collectives and schools of art and design. But they each exist to become a nexus of skill, communication, and the communal investigation of making things; ideologically, their goals share the same quality of synthesis, to collapse the communal experience of art, craft, daily life, and inner thought. When speaking of the Bauhaus Weaving Workshops, designer Otti Berger has said that the goal of the Bauhaus is not to train artists, but to make humans of artists (Weltege 1998). Within the communal and collaborative learning of craft skill, a particular humanism emerges, one that incites individuals to share in and be connected to larger narratives of primary human skills and technology.

We experienced this manner of community sharing of skill at the Ox Bow School of Art in Saugatuck, Michigan. Set amongst the sandy dunes of Lake Michigan, the workshop persists as the primary framework of production. The glass workshop, the clay workshop, the metals workshop ... these sites carry with them a local, intimate history. Each site sustains the residue of many makers who have come through before. We see the layers of clay on the floor, a fingerprint left on the wall. We see the spindly threads of glass left by glass blowers, we see the pile of scrap metal, the soot and smoothed pathways made on the hardwood floors, the remains of decades of projects come and gone. Over years of highly specialized use and the repeated touch of shared tools, the workshop begins to acquire an aesthetic of its own, one that is shaped by the accreted movements of bodies trained in the specific gestures of hand-work. In the workshop, collaboration takes on additional dimensions. While the gestures of communal work shape the projects made in the present, those same gestures leave signs upon the space, the evidence of activity adding to and altering the space itself. These slow transformations of space become collaborations with makers of the past, makers once there but long gone.

The workshop is a reliquary of gestures, an archive of skilled movements. It is full of the tacit knowledge Richard Sennett (2008: 77) describes in the workshops of

masters, the wordless, habitual residues, "the thousand little everyday moves that add up in sum to a practice." As we add our movements to this record, we do so under the understanding that other makers will come after us at some unforeseen and distant point in the future, and we only occupy the space of making for a sliver of time in the strata of craft's collective history.

Reflecting this collectivity, the Internet has become a kind of vast, virtual workshop, where the experiences of many makers now accrete. It has transformed how skill can be experienced, how we confront the ownership, teaching, and dissemination of skill. Where once secrets of dye vats and clay bodies were birthrights and the inheritance of children from their ancestors, taught in highly specialized workshops—now such secrets spread virally, loosely from hand to hand, continent to continent, not over the course of generations, but instantaneously at the click of a mouse and with no need for specific workshops such as those at the Ox Bow School of Art. The Internet is an archive of techniques, an unending tide of "how-to" and step-by-step instructions. Students, highly skilled makers, hobbyists, and amateurs all approach this knowledge with equal access. These skills are constantly evolving, added to by the voices of many makers and ever refined. From this a particular ideology also emerges one that extrapolates the impulse to share skill. In a way, this is itself a radical critique of specialization, of the dominant hierarchies of rarified skills only accessible to a select few. That an individual can learn all they need to know about the processes of Shibori surface design and the use of natural dyes from YouTube is a stunning democratization of highly specialized skills and ways of thinking. While this virtual availability of craft knowledge may come with a sense of an affront towards the sacred knowledge once held up in the hallowed fingertips of a few, it also gives increased agency to those who might otherwise not have access to such knowledge. As makers, we must each negotiate how such democratization alters our relationship to our own skills.

Furthermore, it is not our intention to suggest that such a virtual studio can replace or is even in competition with the physical spaces of making and teaching of craft processes. Workshops are necessary: equipment, tools, and their physicality must persist. What we do recognize is that physical spaces of making have opened up into the virtual and the digital as tools of dissemination. Knowledge of skill is no longer bound up in the edifice of place, but is open and roaming online. This openness is an expansion of our physicality and the way we can think of ourselves and our abilities. Skill, like all information in the digital era, shows itself as a force that desires fluidity, boundlessness and the complex generosity of the open source. The new vernacular of craft responds to the open forum, to file sharing and skill sharing, to the disembodied public as collective maker—a public invested not only in the production of objects, but in the conflation of haptic and digital experience as evidence of an undifferentiated and resplendent human existence between the metaphysical and material world.

Mercurial Things

The Internet is in part a vast, open studio. As it evolves into a place of thought and of making, this communal studio, this workshop, transmits not only ideas but objects themselves—objects are coded in files and output physically into the world via any variety of digital manufacture, at-home 3D printing, for example. In a way, this resonates with age-old dreams of transmutation, and it represents a reawakened longing to make something out of nothing. Technologies such as 3D-printing represent not only a revolution of physicality, but introduce new ideologies to how we can imagine ourselves as makers both embodied and disembodied within the virtual.

Much writing has been devoted to the global, humanitarian possibilities of these emerging technologies, and stories about prosthetic limbs designed, shared online, and 3D-printed in all corners of the globe continue to inspire, spark debate, and invite the criticism of pure novelty. Yet, the ideals of such form of manufacture continue to be elusive. The qualities inherent to the things that descend from such forms of file sharing are difficult to fully unpack. This is due, in part, to a primary lack of language.

In the virtual workshop, there is the opportunity to share ideal forms liberated from the fallibility

of material—this is itself an ideology, ideology sprung from technology. It is a new proposal for the very elemental conception of what it is to craft an object. Working digitally reverses the procedural elements of craftwork. We do not necessarily begin with the manipulation and experimentation of materials, but the manipulation of language, data, and thought. The digital becomes a new organ of touch, one that allows for as-of-yet unimagined possibilities for form. Stemming directly from the ideal and imagined place of thought, through the coded processes of computation, and finally through mechanized modes of three-dimensional, physical output, the objects that are derived from virtual forms of production share a new kind of immediacy of touch. The hand no longer stands alone as the mind's only avenue of influence upon the physical world.

Inarguably, the hand has limitations. It has a number of fingers, a flat palm, and parameters for its exquisite range of motion. It is a set, a kind of tool, a specific machine. Like all tools and machines, it is likely to produce certain kinds of things. Where does a ceramic bowl get its shape? We need only look onto our own cupped palms to see the bowl's first shape, its formal and utilitarian ancestor. All vessel forms contemplate the cupped shape of the hands; amphora and coffee mugs and the great teacups of Korea can each be traced back as permutations of the empty hands cupped side by side. Production in the digital offers us new hands, ones whose shapes and textures have little precedent. Designing a form in the computer frees the maker to explore intricacies the hand cannot yield, not because of the hand's lack of skill, but because the computer and the hand are different tools. To think of form as data first opens up complexities in physicality still being explored by makers, as can be seen in the exhibition *New Morphologies: Studio Ceramics and Digital Processes* at the Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art at Alfred University (2013).

It is important to mention that the hand is not at all diminished by the introduction of new technologies in 3D printing and other emerging forms of digital fabrication.

Technological advancements in the field of craft follow a tradition of innovation that is as old as our species, as nuanced and elemental as kiln-fire or back-strap looms. All these technologies, whether ancient, mechanical, industrial, digital, or virtual, are bridges between the imagined and the actual—although diverse in their socio-political and economic implications, they stand together as enhancements, hybridizations or supplements of the hand, our primal tool of physical influence. Tools are always extensions of the hand, of the body. There is less difference between a wooden rib to mold clay, a weaver's shuttle, and a laptop trackpad when we consider how and why we utilize them. We are always projecting our bodies outwards, transferring energy and intentions into the spaces that exist beyond our own skin. The sewing needle is not a threat to the hand, nor is it an affront to its inherent dexterity. Rather, it affirms and reveals the hand's potential to interact as medium between the interior world of creative thought and the exterior world of material reality.

When we consider friction between the hand and the digital, what is revealed to us are our own strongly held beliefs about the ideal state of objects and of crafted things. What is the ideal state of an object? Could it be that the ideal state of a cup or a blanket is in the moment of functionality? Every cup and every blanket are re-enactments of ideal function in the pure necessity of bringing us water or bringing us warmth. Or do we imagine other ideal moments? Is the perfect state of an object something projected from the recesses and mysterious realms of memory and of the heart? Is it that we hope to hold our beloved things in our minds, in a state of frozen perfection like relics from the ancient world paralyzed inside the vacuum chambers of museum vitrines? Or does a tattered blanket from childhood hold some other perfection, an authenticity that shares a seam with the ideal?

What if the ideal state of an object is in fact the object's existence as thought? In that case, it is in the digital space that such manifestations of ideal objects dwell. Not only this, but it is in the digital space that these ideal object-thoughts are open to the simultaneous manipulation of many minds and many "hands." In the virtual workshop, there is only the hope of the object, the dream of the object as unadulterated—as it exists in

the mind. In the virtual workshop, in lines of code or rendered in CAD software, the making of a physical object begins as a discussion, as an immaterial passage of languages.

What of the ideal state of making? To touch an object made manifest in the physical world through digital means, such as a 3D-printed ceramic vessel, is to touch a thing that has entered our world from an ethereal, unbounded world of information. This has direct parallels, metaphorically, to ancient ways of making things. To make thread out of wool, to turn that thread into warp and weft is to make order out of chaos, organization out of tangles. To mold wet clay into a form using the hand is to draw a shape out of the abyss, to find form in formlessness. These ways of making are unified in that they express the human need to find order where we see disorder, to see potential in disorder. In all our respective practices, we represent skills that range from traditions of handwork to new methodologies of digital production. It is through collaboration that we can begin to imagine these skills, sometimes seemingly conflicted and contradictory, as representing an expansive toolkit designed to function in service of cultural production. The conflict between our skills becomes the generative energy of making together.

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