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Craft Is All We Have

Craft as an emancipatory methodology

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Abstract

"Craft is all we have" frames craft as an emancipatory methodology that challenges the abstractions of capitalist time and space. Drawing on theoretical contributions from and beyond contemporary craft discourse, the text positions craft as a dynamic epistemological field — relational, situated, and resistant to the temporal and spatial logics of extraction, acceleration, and commodification. Rather than a nostalgic return to tradition, craft is articulated here as a plural, dividual process: one that sustains embodied knowledge, cultivates care, and generates alternative economies of making. As our social and material systems strain under capitalist extractivism, craft offers critical tools for imagining and enacting more attentive, grounded, and transformative forms of life and labour.

Introduction

Ever since modernity pushed craft to the margins, craft has largely been (mis)understood not for what it is, but for what it is not — not industry, not technology, not fine art. In reality, rather than peripheral, craft is embedded in every aspect of our lives, operating at the intersections of the fields with which it is superficially considered incompatible: technology and mass production, fine and applied art, function and non-function. Described by Julia Bryan-Wilson as "a wedge that reveals stark distinctions within ideologies of taste and value" (Bryan-Wilson, 2018), craft is a porous, versatile, multi-layered, and multi-directional mode of making and thinking. This multiplicity keeps craft open-ended, and therefore difficult to define. On the one hand, closed-ended definitions risk limiting our understanding of craft's potential. On the other, open-ended ones reduce craft's meaning to a vague, catch-all term devoid of true usefulness in contemporary discourse. A more productive approach is to consider craft's potential as an emancipatory methodology: a way of making and thinking that resists the dominant frameworks of industrial (and post-industrial) capitalism.

When examined in relation to today's complex post-industrial landscape, craft offers an alternative system of critical reflection and policy-making, activating reflection on all aspects of production and consumption — not only concerning the provenance of materials and techniques, but also the implications of mass production on labour, society, and nature. Instead of falling into the trap of looking at craft as inherently in-opposition-to other fields, we shift our focus to craft-in-relation-to the notions of time and space within the capitalist context. This craft-based relational aesthetics re-positions craft as a field that encompasses the past, the present, and the future, carrying within it the dynamic relationships between different temporalities, spaces, materialities and bodies. As such, craft is always

contemporary: it exists through time, occupying physical and symbolic spaces that expand and shrink organically to respond to changing conditions, and can therefore be seen as a labyrinth or a constellation of co-existing possibilities, resisting capitalism's managerial sovereignty over time and space.

In the sections that follow, through theoretical references from and beyond contemporary craft discourse, we explore how craft can offer not only an alternative model for organizing production, consumption, and labour, but also a broader paradigm for reimagining the conditions of our social, spatial, and material realities. In *Time is all we have*, we examine how craft resists capitalism's self-destructive acceleration into the future, and proposes a slower, relational, non-instrumental rhythm of making. In *Space is all we have*, we turn to the spatial dimensions of craft, investigating how practices of making reconfigure abstract, commodified space into lived, relational environments grounded in care and mutual presence. Finally, in *Craft is all we have*, we expand our theoretical and practical references to further elaborate on our vision of craft as a method of critical world-making — one that challenges the structural logic of (post-)industrial capitalism and opens space for alternative futures.

Time is all we have

"There has been history, but there is no longer any." Thus, did Marx (1847/1963, p. 121) describe capitalism's relation to the past. And what use could capitalism have for history? All the past before capitalism is, to use David Gross' remarkable phrase, "a past in ruins" (1992): it is that which capitalism has laid waste, conquered, and looted. And capitalism's own past is merely obsolete. It produces its present as that which is already being superseded, as that which is destined to be disposed of. Capitalism's past is not a ruin but a dump piled high with temporal waste: the overproduction of the once-present become refuse. Walter Benjamin's Angel of History saw this as "one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble" (1940/2005, Thesis IX). Capitalism calls this "growth."

Nor, therefore, has capitalism a true sense of the future. For it, the future is only ever that which is already becoming present, that which it produces in order to remain "up to date." Its future is now, its future is here and, therefore, that which it is always already preparing to discard. Small wonder, then, that capitalism is prepared to set the future of the planet itself on fire merely so that today and tomorrow it can consume more oil, minerals, forests, water, and people in order to produce more of that which, the week after, shall be added to the pile of rubble.

It is, of course, science – or, rather, its application in technology – that once gave capitalism its smug sense of accelerating into the future, however myopically conceived. Hence, science now exists primarily as an adjunct of capital, systematically funded and organized by the capitalist class and its governments. Under such conditions, reason cannot govern production but must itself be governed by it. What little independence science is able to win from these conditions reduces it to a Cassandra crying out a doom that is already come. To be socially efficacious, it must accept its subordination and dutifully play its appointed role as the motor for the advancement of productive technique. And so, science, too, is an element of capital's relation to the past – it is that which pushes the present into it.

Skill is a historical accumulation

Although we are most familiar with capital's temporal profligacy as consumers of commodities built to be disposed of at the speed of money, in fact it is most significantly expressed in the realm of production. This may seem counter-intuitive. Since the time of Marx, the expansion of capital has been figured as the accumulation of past labour-time fixed and frozen as capital. From the vantage-point of capital this is certainly so. But the accumulation of capital does not occur only in the abstract realm of quantitative increase; it is simultaneously the transformation and intensification of the labour process by the accumulation of science. Capital experiences this too as the result of its historical accumulation: of knowledge built upon knowledge, technique upon technique. And yet, capitalism does not *amass* historically mastered techniques – technological innovation arrives by eventually suppressing and superseding that which came before.

For this reason, historically speaking, the producers experienced capital accumulation *not* as an accumulation of technique but as the destruction of the historically developed repertoire of knowledge and manual skill that comprised their crafts. The advance of capitalism has meant, as Harry Braverman observed, "the *transformation* of labour from a basis of skill to a basis of science" monopolized by capital (1974, p. 155, our emphasis). The accumulation of science under the aegis of capital therefore began as the original expropriation of craft skill from the worker. The loss of craft skill and technique as the historical birthright of the producer and the accumulation of capitalist science are the same story told from opposite points of view:

> the working class is progressively subjected to the capitalist mode of production, and to the successive forms which it takes, *only as the capitalist mode of production conquers and destroys all other forms of the organization of labour, and with them, all alternatives for the working population.* (p. 149, original emphasis)

Capitalism treats even newly developed skills as cheaply as traditional ones. It is true, as Braverman acknowledges, that the degradation of skill in favour of managerial mastery of the labour process is rarely absolute and always uneven across industries and that, moreover, the very same process by which deskilling is advanced causes new crafts, skills, and technical specialties to emerge as "the province of labour" (p. 172). But one need only consider the slavering boosterism with which managers regard AI-driven code production to see that even the most apparently modern skills are subject to deskilling and to expropriation as capital.

And yet, so complete has the original expropriation of skill been that few workers today experience capitalist production as a loss of craft skill for the simple reason that such skills were never a part of their lifeworld to begin with. It is, therefore, a struggle even to feel the wound constituted by the generalized loss of craft. Modern craft discourse emerged at a time when that wound was still fresh, as a way of confronting the injury. But, strangely, a distinct body of commentary has emerged from within modern craft theory founded upon the denial of this same injury. For example, in *The Shape of Craft*, Ezra Shales (2017) emphasizes the continued reliance of modern manufacturing processes upon hand-work, craft, and what he characterizes as skill while denying that capitalism has fundamentally transformed and degraded the meaning of those words. Hence, the indubitable fact that "craftspeople existed" was proven to his students when they met Connie Chapus and others working at CUTCO, a producer of high-end knives in New York. Chapus, a knife-grinder who worked to grind the final edge of CUTCO knives, he implies, was a worker who took "pride in industrial workmanship" and so "challenges our generalization that an assembly line exists only as an alienating phenomenon" (p. 145). This is not our generalization. However, Shales' inadequate understanding of alienation as "old-time Victorian Marxist (and Ruskinian) pseudo-psychology" (2013, p. 269) rather than as expressing an objective social relation is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the incidental that, some years prior to the publication of Shales' book, CUTCO and the company it uses to sell its products came under scrutiny for enlisting young college students as direct sellers in what was allegedly a multi-level marketing scheme (Lazarus, 2020). If Chapus felt pride in her work, this did not give her and her co-workers the ability to determine the parameters of their production, including the means by which the products that they made would be distributed. The ability of such enterprises to gamble with both the producer's pride and livelihood results precisely from the general loss of control over production that is meant by the alienation of labour. It is a state of affairs that was not created by the assembly line, although the latter emerged under the conditions created by the former.

Far more pressing, however, than the embarrassing details of this example is the straight-faced acceptance of what capitalist marketing chooses to call craft and skill. As Braverman

put it, “The capitalist mode of production systematically destroys all-around skills where they exist, and brings into being skills and occupations that correspond to its needs. Technical capacities are henceforth distributed on a strict ‘need to know’ basis” (p. 82). So, Chapus, while she worked at CUTCO, was not a cutler but a grinder. This work is indeed more ‘skilled’ than that of many workers in a modern Western capitalist economy and pride in it is not surprising. It is, nevertheless, worth comparing this sense of the worker’s skill in relation to capitalist production processes to that which existed in an earlier phase of its development. Consider, for example, the editorial written by John P. Frey circa 1915 for the *International Molders’ Journal* titled “Modern Industry and Craft Skill.” According to Frey

> The one great asset of the wage worker has been his craftsmanship. We think of craftsmanship ordinarily as the ability to manipulate skilfully the tools and materials of a craft or trade. But ... the really essential element in it is not manual skill and dexterity but something stored up in the mind of the worker. This something is partly the intimate knowledge of the character and uses of the tools, materials and processes of the craft which tradition and experience have given the worker. But beyond this and above this, it is the knowledge which enables him to understand and overcome the constantly arising difficulties that grow out of variations not only in the tools and materials, but in the conditions under which the work must be done. In the past, for the most part, the skillful manipulation of the tools and materials of a craft and this craftsmanship of the brain have been bound up together in the person of the worker and have been his possession. (Hoxie, 1920, p. 131)

Frey goes further. The technical division of the total craft process into its smallest component parts and the doling out of these tasks to workers who no longer train in the all-round craft means that each worker “needs and can exercise only a little craft knowledge and a little craft skill. But he is still a craftsman, though only a narrow one and subject to much competition from below.” However, this process can and often does go further in the form of

> the gathering up of all this scattered craft knowledge, systematizing it and concentrating it, in the hands of the employer and then doling it out again only in the form of minute instructions, giving to each worker only the knowledge needed for the mechanical performance of a particular relatively minute task. This process, it is evident, separates skill and knowledge even in their narrow relationship. When it is completed, the worker is no longer a craftsman in any sense, but is an animated tool of the management. (p. 132)

Frey, who was an iron moulder before becoming a trade union leader and activist, was no Ruskinian, still less an old-time Victorian Marxist, but a staunch anti-communist and ideologue of the conservative wing of the labour movement. The difference between the understanding of craft given in his testimony and the quietist acceptance of capital's transformation of craft implicit in what has become the mainstream of contemporary craft theory is a significant indication of the increasingly conservative state of contemporary discursive production around craft.

Crafting a future rich with its past

The effect of modern capitalism's colonization of skill is to reduce the presence of the worker as a *subject* of production – a position that itself becomes, progressively, the function of capital. Under these conditions, therefore, the advance of technology becomes the instrument of "the progressive alienation of the process of production from the worker" (Braverman, 1974, p. 58). Shales' persistent denial that this is something worth critiquing is entirely consonant with a version of presentism that mirrors capital's own. This appears in the form of an emphasis on the historical continuity of craft that refuses to acknowledge crafts radical transformation by capitalism. This very transformation is rendered invisible by his suggestion that "between distinct eras of production, skills are incomparable" (p. 211), the implication of which is that no assessment of deskilling is possible. Therefore, to see in craft a critical alterity rooted in the survival of past relations to work and materials eroded and attacked by capitalism's drive to be productively up-to-date becomes mere romantic foolishness. Hence, he writes, "historically, champions of craft" have been "encumbered by nostalgia and *temporal self-loathing"* (p. 25, our italics).

To return to the question of capitalism and temporality, there is one sense in which capitalism knows the future: as the end of the world. And why not? The capitalist present is already experienced by many peoples and whole species as an apocalypse and capitalism's image of the future is nothing but the present, only more so and faster. If we are to secure an actual future for our species, and many others besides, we ought to begin by cultivating an open loathing for our own capitalist present and perhaps a greater openness to the loathing that the historical champions of craft felt for theirs. More urgently, however, a break with the ideological limits of "capitalist realism" (Fisher, 2009) requires an ability to imagine a rational and liberated society capable of functioning without destroying, as capitalism does, the conditions of its own existence. This was the sustained project of William Morris – the explicit target of much contemporary craft commentary. He engages in this project by imagining a relationship to the past that secures a rich temporality far more complex than can be captured by the typical understanding of nostalgia.

Central to Morris' view of an alternative to capitalism is his idea that in the struggle for the future, "we may have to recur to ideas that to-day seem to belong to the past only." But this *recurrence* is not a retracing of steps, it is rather a "carrying on of progress from a point where we abandoned it a while ago" (Morris, 1888). The present is not arrived at via a linear progress but only exists by aborting all the possible paths that could have led to a *different* present. Necessarily, therefore, we in the present "have disappointed the hopes of the period just before the time of [their] abandonment" (1888). Morris turns to history as the record of those disappointed hopes in order to ask whether "we, or our sons, or our sons' sons, should quicken them once more?" (1888, we leave aside Morris' phallocentrism) in a time when these hopes are achievable more fully than they were when they were first dimly sighted. Morris answers in the affirmative because the hopes he had in mind belong properly to all producers throughout history: to shake off the chains of exploitation and oppression and so to keep the "blessings of labour" (1890/2010). If, therefore, Morris sees the alternative to capitalism as a kind of dialectical recurrence, this is not out of a nostalgia for the past but because of the continuity of the present struggle for that alternative with the struggles of all past producers for freedom from exploitation. It is "the ancient hope of the workmen ... coming to life again" (1890/2010). The future, then, much like the present, is pregnant with the past: not as something to be overcome or repressed – but as something alive, as a promise fulfilled. The past is a peer to the future, and therefore also to those who struggle for that future in the present. (Here Morris bears a striking resemblance to Walter Benjamin, for whom the past is always ripe for resurrection. According to Benjamin, there is "an echo of those who have been silenced in the voices to which we lend our ears today." Hence, the living have an "appointment" with the past which in turn has a claim upon us. Our struggles for the future in the present are also the means by which that claim of the past upon us is settled (Benjamin, 1940/2005, Thesis II).) What must be emphasized is that recovery is not repetition: that which is reclaimed is advanced on new bases that permit it a "fuller life" gained from its "seeming death" (Morris & Bax, 1885).

Hence, it is no surprise that handicrafts too find a dialectical recurrence in Morris' conception of the future society. Importantly, however, Morris did not value craft as an ahistorical abstraction, nor was hand-work in and of itself liberating or always a pleasure. Morris, in spite of his staunch anti-nationalism, was specifically enamoured with 14th century English craft and art, believing that the productive classes of Medieval England produced everything they made beautifully. This, however, could not have been the result of some essence of pre-capitalist craft, and certainly was not due to any innate superiority of the English. Rather, it was itself a *symptom* of the results of the class struggle in England at that time. The producing classes, having organized themselves as a social, political, and economic force in the guilds were one side of a "continuous and fierce struggle between the

aristocratic and democratic elements in the towns" (1890/2010). The historical result of this struggle was that, for a period, the producer worked "freely, and for no master; having ... full control over his material, tools, and time," (1890/2020). In most cases, it was not the feudal ruling class that set the terms of production, but the organizations of the producers – the guilds – who went so far as to plan what items would be produced, in what quantity, and to what minimum standard of quality. Beauty did not come from the inherent nature of handwork, rather it was the "inevitable result" of this hard-won freedom (1890/2020).

The scope of skill and the freedom of the medieval producer represented, for Morris, a high watermark in the struggle of producers everywhere to gain collective freedom and control over production. They saw, says Morris, "the promised land of Socialism from afar" (1890/2010). But for a range of complex historical reasons, including the underdeveloped scientific and technological basis of that society, they could not proceed to that promised land and, turning back from it, had to wander in the desert of capitalism – a corresponding low point in that same struggle. If, Morris asks, the producers of the 14th century were able to achieve so much in spite of having been unable to take their struggle to victory, then what might we, taking up that same struggle on new grounds, do with the victory fully achieved?

His answer, surprising to his peers in the Arts and Crafts movement as much as to his critics today, was that the first task of the new society will be to make full use of the most advanced techniques of social production – his word for which was machinery – placed under the democratic control of the freely associated producers (Morris, 1884). Morris, taking to heart Marx's and Engels' observation that crises under capitalism take the form of crises of *over*production (Marx & Engels, 1948/2008, p. 8-9), assumed that, sensibly managed and geared towards democratic ends, technology can allow society to very comfortably meet its needs. Such a society would be far less wasteful, not having to spend labour or resources upon, for example, warfare. Nor would it need to glut the market with shoddy wares in a competitive scramble for profit – we would see a dialectical recurrence of the social coordination of production pioneered by the guilds. The result of needing to produce far less is needing to work far less. In this, he did not differ from most of his Marxist contemporaries.

What is interesting is what comes after. If the immediate results of this new social organization were likely to be "a great development of machinery for really useful purposes," Morris suspected that later, if it seemed to the associated producers

> that a certain industry would be carried on more pleasantly as regards the worker, and more effectually as regards the goods, by using hand-work rather than machinery, they will certainly get rid of their machinery, because it will be possible

> for them to do so. It isn't possible now; we are not at liberty to do so; we are slaves to the monsters which we have created. (1884)

Hence, such a future society can sustain itself on “fewer, better things,” not as a form of elitism (Adamson, 2019, p. 137) but as a democratic and ecological principle (Soper, 2023). Under capitalism, the drive of competitive accumulation means that the invention of new productive techniques becomes an obligation. But a free society must be free to choose how it lives. It is not obligated to what it invents, nor to adopt these inventions universally at the expense of previous methods. In such a society, the whole history of production becomes a vast archive of potential and new and old forms of working can intermingle and modify each other. The dialectic of recurrence becomes a willed and conscious practice. To return to Benjamin, “only for a resurrected humanity would its past, in each of its moments, be citable” (1940/2005, Theses III). And it is just such a humanity that Morris envisions.

Where does that leave craftspeople today, working, very much unlike Morris, when the end of capitalism does not seem at all on the horizon? Does craft exist as nothing more than degraded survivals amidst under- and de-development here or there living upon the largesse of the ruling class, typically by servicing the “swinish luxury of the rich” (Thompson, 1955/1977, p. 250) or its approximation for the less-rich? In what follows we will present a more robust sense of craft’s critical possibilities, but in relation to what has so far been argued it can be said that crafts today seem to prefigure, however stuntedly, the rich temporality Morris finds in the society of the future. Today, craftspeople rarely practice their craft as the inheritors of an unbroken Tradition, and even then, only weakly. In order to develop their craft, makers today must confront the whole technical history of their craft as a menu from which to derive their own methods. Hence, electric kilns made with the latest refractory materials, digitally controlled and hooked up to the Wi-Fi, are loaded with pinch pots while hacked 3D printers coil vessels to which thrown spouts and pulled handles are attached (Figure 1). All the history of productive technique is subject to a principle of selection and tested for its possibilities. And, in this, contemporary craftspeople have expanded the ecumenism developed by Morris. Morris himself imagined that it was impossible to work joyfully *with* machines – machines either did the work or people did. This is not the dogma of contemporary craftspeople, who are finding richer ways of making use not only of machinery but of every kind of advanced productive technique. The crafts today “keep alive memories of the past which are necessary elements of the life of the future, and methods of work which no society could afford to lose” (Morris, 1888), and moreover do so not by preserving them in amber but by making them live and work with methods developed in the present, hybridizing them in a manner that points, in its cramped and narrow fashion, to the way such a redemption may be universalized in the future. This technical eclecticism differs from the formal eclecticism of much industrial design, which tends to operate at the

level of style. Here, eclecticism is a matter of methods and material processes, shaping not only how objects look but how we bring them (and, therefore, potentially ourselves) into being. It is, therefore, potentially, a nascent ethics for our relation to what Marx has called "the open book of man's essential powers" (Marx, 1964, p. 142). In order to consider other aspects of craft as an emancipatory methodology, we turn now to the problem of space.

Figure 1

Ceramic tea set with printed, thrown, and pulled components. 2018, by Heather Lott. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Space is all we have

The question of space, the processes of its production, and itself as a means of production, are always already inscribed in the social terrain of present human relations. Henri Lefebvre (1974/1991) reminds us that space is never innocent. It is produced actively, forcefully, by the dominant mode of production, embedded in the relations of power that saturate everyday lived experience. What appears to us as neutral terrain is, in fact, a structured abstraction: the space of highways, of zoning codes, of industrial districts and office towers. It is the proper space of capital, measurable, programmable, emptied of whatever form of resistance. It is a space stripped of surprises. Under these conditions, space no longer invites

habitation, it rather enforces product circulation. It no longer holds life but manages movement.

And yet, this same space carries the memory of other uses – other desires, repressed, overwritten, but not erased. For every imposed grid there is a trace of the skipped step, the unregistered gathering, the unlicensed market, disorganized bodies. Differential space, in Lefebvre's terms, emerges in these cracks, in the lived and felt space of bodies moving differently. It is not simply space as it is, but space *becoming*, a space that insists on the right to difference, on the right to opacity, to rhythm, to use.

To link with this potential, the return to craft must refuse the amputations capitalism has made of it, must not allow craft to be understood solely by what capital needs from it. Craft-making, permitted to grow into an emancipatory methodology, refuses the smooth coherence of abstract space. Its gestures linger. They resist the flattening of time into mere efficiency, and the flattening of space into mere function. The craftsperson works against disembodied production, rooting knowledge in place, in rhythm, in material resistance (Sennett, 2008). To craft is to produce space differently, as a matrix of touch, memory, effort, and care. A space that is not made once and for all, but always remade, relationally, improvisationally, in concert with the lives that move through it.

To dwell within this space of making is to think through the body, through hands that learn by repetition, by failure, by the slow recognition of a material's will. This is what embodied knowledge means: not the possession of a technique, but a reciprocal memory between the maker and the material. Every gesture, pressure, and hesitation becomes part of an archive inscribed in muscle, in rhythm, in resistance. The physical process is not an accessory to thought; it is thought in motion, sedimented in practice, and shared through touch, apprenticeship, and improvisation. In this sense, the act of crafting becomes an epistemological choreography, one that moves with the body's intelligence and the world's material counterpoint.

Our cities, saturated with commodified speed, can no longer hold the temporalities of living. The implosion is not metaphorical: it is concrete, material, sensorial. As materials are exhausted and labour is atomized, space collapses into dead infrastructure. There is no breath in such spaces, only the repetition of units. Craft reintroduces breath. It slows the process down. It dignifies the gesture. It inserts memory into the flow of production. It generates not just things, but *milieus*, conditions for presence, for relation, for the sustenance of shared life.

Abstract space, the space of flows, of logistics, of controlled visibility, is intolerant to friction. It demands smoothness, predictability, obedience. It is a space built not to be lived in, but to

be passed through: airports, data centres, shopping malls, suburban highways. This is the spatial condition of alienation, not only because it severs relations, but because it disciplines the very possibility of relation. Space becomes surface. What remains is a geography of indifference.

But living space resists. It exceeds. It pushes back with irregularities, with textures, with the murmur of bodies refusing to be mapped. Lived space, Lefebvre's third space, beyond the perceived and the conceived, is a space of encounter and rehearsal. It is not given; it is performed. It is not owned; it is shared. It is crafted moment by moment through gestures of care, attention, and improvisation. And it is this crafting that threatens the apparatus of abstract domination. Because to dwell, truly dwell, is to slow down, to inhabit time differently, to listen to the material world rather than control it.

The return to craft is not a retreat. It is not nostalgia. It is an insurgency of presence. In a world bent on acceleration, it is a practice of endurance. Where abstract space fragments and isolates, craft binds and composes. It gathers the broken parts of our cities, the leftover materials, the neglected skills, the discarded stories, and weaves them into a space that speaks. A space with edges. A space that remembers.

To produce space through craft is to insist on spatial poetics: space not as a container, but as a chorus. Every act of making, mending, shaping, building, becomes an act of spatial articulation. A sentence in a language of slowness. A verse in the poetry of survival. It is in these verses that the seeds of another city are sown – not the smart city of sensors and data streams, but the sensitive city, the listening city, the city of held time.

To move in the present

Courage and politics alone are no longer sufficient to reclaim our urban habitat from the saturation of commodified space. What is needed is *poeisis*, virtue, and a commitment to craftsmanship: an attunement to making that is neither rushed by the dictates of efficiency nor reduced to market imperatives. Craftsmanship emerges here as a conceptual and material practice, a rhizomatic movement that connects humans, animals, materials, and the forces of nature into a non-extractive ecology of making.

Against the backdrop of a world increasingly orchestrated by the smooth violence of logistics, a world where everything, including life itself, is routed, tracked, and optimized for circulation, craft offers subversive practices. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney claim (2013), logistics is not merely a technique of transportation but a mode of control, an "informatic of race and capitalism" that conditions the very possibility of movement today.

Under logistics, all relations are pre-emptively ordered, mapped, and commodified. Nothing is allowed to escape the rationalizing grip of capital.

Craft-making, by contrast, is unruly. It refuses the standardization and temporal compression demanded by logistical capitalism. It insists on irregularities, on attention to materials, on relationality rather than extraction. It is a movement that generates its own rhythms, slow, attentive, local, resisting the "ready-made futures" offered by logistical operations. Craftwork thus becomes not a nostalgic return but a conceptual gesture toward another kind of future: one that is assembled, reassembled, and sustained through care, improvisation, and embodied knowledge.

To craft spaces in the present, we must move beyond established political, economic, and social theories, the very frameworks that have become complicit in the reproduction of contemporary catastrophes. These theories have hardened into doctrines that mirror the very logic they fail to resist, capturing thought itself in circuits of prediction and control. As Moten and Harney suggest, true thought emerges not from the authorized disciplines but from what they call the undercommons, the fugitive, experimental, and collective spaces of study and making.

Thus, the movement toward crafting new urban forms must be a movement without blueprints. It must be a movement of improvisation, where relationships with materials, spaces, and others are forged on the move. We take from crafts the non-professional skill of combining familiar materials with emergent ideas, not derived from theories but from lived experience. Movement generates new relations; new relations generate new movements. This is the dynamic that undercuts logistical management and opens a terrain for a politics of mutual making. A politics inseparable from poetics.

In the spaces crafted through such practices, the domination of logistics over time and space falters. Here, temporality stretches, the materiality of the world speaks back, care reasserts itself against control. To craft is to stay with the trouble, to compose life with the material rhythms of the earth, not to engineer it for efficiency. In this sense, craft-making is a radical act: a refusal of the logistical imperative, and an insistence on life's ungovernable creativity.

Materially embedded mutual care

Care and nurturing! And how much of these does the citizen of today get? The citizen, the dispossessed subject, indebted, lacking experience, limited in movement, poor in learning and deeply lonely. Everything the citizen has today comes from far away. They do not know, do not have time to know, do not conceive of space while going home. Craft's positionality teaches us about dislocation and dispersion. Crafts are spaces of relation-generation as

opposed to commodity-production. Generating and maintaining relations always already involves care and nurturing.

In this sense, crafting reclaims care as an embedded material practice. As Donna Haraway suggests, “caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning.” (Haraway, 2016) Care is not a sentimental act but a rigorous, often uncomfortable, practice of attention, responsibility, and mutual transformation. Crafts embody this ethic of curiosity and commitment: to make is to become vulnerable to the material world, to be shaped by its demands, and to respond creatively and responsibly.

This responsiveness is always corporeal. The maker’s body becomes a site of negotiation, with gravity, texture, resistance, and duration. Embodied knowledge is not abstract awareness but a choreography of adjustments, where sensing and shaping are inseparable. Through these micro-relations, craft renders visible how knowledge is always material: it resides in gestures that cannot be written but only practiced, transmitted through proximity and shared attention. The intimacy between hand, tool, and substance becomes a medium of learning that exceeds language, a pedagogy of attunement and patience.

Crafts enable a mutuality that escapes the dominant exploitative relations of today, the strictly financial, distanced seller-buyer transaction. Care and nurturing relations enable sustainable communication. They build trust, and belonging, to subjects as well as to objects. Belonging to objects is not a bad proposition, as long as we are being-with and staying-with the objects, in mutual communication with the materiality of nature.

From this perspective, care is not a private or isolated act but a multiple, material, and political process. The dynamic interplay between humans, animals, objects, and elements forms a web of co-dependency that challenges the extractive logic of capitalist logistics. As Moten and Harney say, true study, and by extension true care, occurs in the fugitive spaces outside institutional capture, where knowledge and practices circulate without preemption or standardization (Moten & Harney, 2013).

Knowledge is relentlessly and speedily erased in profit-driven production for the market. Natural resources are destroyed and the products of the speculative market are thrown away with the aim of keeping prices high. There is no genius, less so artificial, intelligence that can make sense and find logic within this mess we are in. But it is the organic co-production of craft making, a making-with, being-with, and staying-with nature as living material that ensures the dependency of mutual survival.

Only a caring and nurturing mutuality paves the way to freeing us from the limbo of our current social bodies. Bodies that resist change and constantly fall into the trick of memory, which always already invites nostalgia. Such is also the nostalgia for crafts: the trick that romanticizes and locks away crafts into the emotional longing for the past. This is why we must insist that crafts are a conceptual toolbox for the future. We disassemble and reassemble what we need and what works from the toolbox in our movement through and with the present materiality. Crafting ourselves in spaces-generating processes which bend and blend new thinking.

Learning from crafts is a radical gesture of tricking the future. Instead of projecting into it, aiming at it, borrowing from it through advanced technologies, craft knowledge opens radical contestations of the present space and positions us towards the line of movement. In resisting the process of shrinking of time, which is the dominant drive of the dynamics of commodity-production for the profit market – commodities must not last, must not be repaired – we use the slowed-down temporality of crafts. Time for understanding materials, learning their nature, practicing skills, transferring knowledge.

Craft-making is also about repairing the soul of objects. And at the heart of this process is time. Time in which objects and people gain new relations in their mutual space. Repairing and care, care for the objects and care for the people, should not be separated. Objects, humans, animals. A multitude that can save us from extinction, through practices of attentiveness, relationality, and shared endurance.

Poetics beyond politics

Knowledge of each other on the move is the base material for crafting new practices on the materials and with the materials that we use and are used by. The craft maker always knows the user, and the user learns about the maker and the making process. The craft maker is never merely a salesperson. In this relation, the space of alienation is shrunk; that of disseminated learning is expanded. New kinds of spaces are produced, cities become living flows of poetic matter. The poetics of crafts flows through our social and political spaces making them organic. These are crafted spaces.

Poetics, as opposed to politics and economics, marks the relays that connect all aspects of nature. It is poetics that allows the crafting of gestures, objects, and relations outside the capture of logistical, market-driven rationalities. As Moten and Harney argue, the undercommons is not a place of official recognition but a fugitive site of ongoing, collective study and making, a space where value is generated without being seized and abstracted by capital (Moten & Harney, 2013). In this way, crafting, storytelling, and shared making

become acts of fugitivity: they escape the normal circuits of production, offering instead an embodied form of relation and knowledge.

We take from crafts the skill of storytelling of the urban environment. Stories that speak of the embeddedness of the past in our city space and of the possible patterns for the future. Stories that insist stubbornly on the present. Stories that slow down the speed inflicted by commodities. Stories disseminated, circulated, inherited and transmitted from one to another generation. Stories handled and maintained with care.

This is all the more urgent in what Maurizio Lazzarato calls the “intolerable present”, a regime in which the capitalist economy has not only colonized the present but also mortgaged the future, transforming potentiality itself into a field of debt and control (Lazzarato, 2022/2023). Under such conditions, politics, as traditionally conceived, merely manages the existing catastrophe. It is poetics, the stubborn crafting of relations, narratives and possibilities, that acts as a revolutionary counter-force. It refuses to accept the foreclosure of the future and insists on producing temporalities and socialities not dictated by financial speculation or logistical control.

Against the current urban semantic chaos, a new city of nurtured and nurturing poetics emerges. It is a slow city, a tactile city, a city of crafted stories and shared gestures. A city that bends time back toward the rhythms of life and materiality, resisting the acceleration demanded by commodities. A city where memory is not trapped in nostalgic longing but animates the materials, spaces, and relations with a thick presence of mutual care and becoming.

The aesthetic form of workers and the struggle beyond capitalism

The aesthetic of a caring society is structured around the worker’s visibility, their voice, their labour, in a direct attempt to challenge the capitalist modes of production and the forms of representation that suppress workers. As Rancière notes, aesthetics is not simply a matter of beauty or art, but a “delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, of speech and noise” (Rancière, 2000/2013, 8). It is in this sense that a reconfiguration of the social order must take place. Making workers not only visible but central to the political and economic arrangement.

Without such a reconfiguration, and with the persistence of capitalist modes of production, the aesthetic manifestation of workers is deeply corrupted. As Alain Badiou argues, in our current era, economic imperatives become the central, almost universal force that shapes political action (Badiou, 1993/2001). Workers, once the foundation of political aspiration,

now find themselves reduced to mere commodities within the relentless machinery of financial speculation and market imperatives.

Yet, the aesthetic form of labour – the very visibility of the worker, and the revolutionary possibilities within their struggle – remains a powerful tool. In order to escape the commodification of labour and its domination by capital, we must recognize that the worker's aesthetic form provides a radical potential that both transcends and contradicts capitalist structures. Here, the worker's aesthetic form becomes a vehicle for imagining new relations of labour that are not bound to the capitalist state or market. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose, a radical new "plane of consistency" must be created, one that subverts the alienating structures of capitalist production and allows for an alternative form of social organization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987).

This subversion lies in the workers' ability to organize outside of traditional capitalist structures, whether corporate or state-driven. Craft practices, in particular, which historically resisted mass production, hold a special place here. These practices present a challenge to the logic of market capitalism, standing as alternatives to the systematized commodification of labour. Craftspeople and artisans, in their capacity to produce outside the dominant modes of capitalist production, exhibit forms of labour that resist the temporal pressures of capitalist work, and they illustrate the possibilities of a non-alienated relationship to production. The aesthetic of labour in such practices is a direct contradiction to the standardization and abstraction of time, labour, and value under capitalism. It is a refusal of the capitalist economy's demand for relentless efficiency, a reclaiming of time, space, and meaning from the capitalist machine.

This aesthetic form, as seen in the crafts and smaller-scale production, provides a critique not only of the state and market capitalist economies but also offers a model for rethinking how labour and production can be organized. If we look back to Lefebvre's ideas on the production of space, we can see how these craft practices can be a form of "counter-space." As Lefebvre suggests, the space we inhabit is produced through human relations, and to challenge those relations, we must rethink how space is used, organized, and lived (Lefebvre, 1974/1991). Craft-based labour provides a "counter-space", where workers reimagine their relationship with the tools of their labour, the products they create, and the social relations that structure these activities. This alternative model of production allows for a reconfiguration of space that resists the dehumanizing effects of capitalism.

The aesthetic form of labour is not merely a matter of visible representation. It is an invitation to re-imagine our relations with work and with one another. Craft practices, in their resistance to the capitalist modes of mass production and state control, provide a

model for new forms of labour that could disrupt the capitalist economy's grip on the world. This labour, while grounded in the workers' aesthetic, challenges the system itself, re-embedding labour in a space that escapes commodification and allows for a truly revolutionary reorganization of society, one that places the workers at the centre of social, political, and economic life.

Craft is all we have

The repercussions of the condensed notion of time and abstract organization of space that have been imposed by capitalism were analysed in the previous sections, along with the urgent potential for craft to emerge as a counter-paradigm. Within industrial modernity, time and space are abstracted: time is linear, divisible, and accumulative; space is homogenized and instrumentalized for circulation and extraction. Against this backdrop, craft proposes different temporalities and spatialities – relational, iterative, and grounded.

Given the limitations often found in contemporary approaches to craft, we propose turning to thinkers outside the immediate field to articulate a theoretical discourse that transcends craft's aesthetic and material dimensions, reframing it in a manner that reintroduces craft practices as an epistemological field capable of offering a critical alternative to capitalism. The affinities of craft with these theories suggest important possible directions for further research.

Bruno Latour's critique of linear progressivism grounds a non-capitalist understanding of craft temporality. In *Down to Earth*, Latour calls for a "terrestrial" politics, advocating for modes of existence that are "rooted, entangled, and attentive to situated differences" (2017/2018, p. 17). Craft, through its iterative material engagements and sensitivity to local conditions, embodies such a terrestrial ethos. It proposes a nonlinear, relational form of growth that resists the accelerationist imperatives of extraction and accumulation.

A more comprehensive system of interpretation that refers to both time and space can be found in Sotirios Bahtsetzis' recent work in which he considers the concepts of *chrono-politics* and *topo-economy*. Bahtsetzis (2024) introduces chrono-politics as the contestation of hegemonic temporal regimes – the ways in which time is socially constructed, regulated, and valorized. In capitalist economies, time is abstracted into a universal metric, geared toward efficiency, productivity, and acceleration. Craft, however, embodies what Bahtsetzis terms a "heterochrony" – a multiplicity of temporalities that emerge from material processes, bodily rhythms, and local knowledge systems. Craft time is not merely slower; it is non-linear, situated, and responsive, resisting the universalization of capitalist time. Similarly, Bahtsetzis's concept of topo-economy rethinks the entanglement of place (*topos*)

and economy (*oikonomia*), challenging the abstraction of space into interchangeable, commodified units. In this framework, craft operates within place-specific economies, grounded in the particularities of material resources, historical continuities, and socio-cultural relations. Craft production thus enacts a "spatial economy of difference," where making is inseparable from the environment and community in which it is embedded. Rather than being uprooted for the sake of global circulation, craft practices affirm the irreducible complexity of local worlds. Through the twin prisms of chrono-politics and topo-economy, craft can be reframed not as a nostalgic remnant of a pre-industrial past, but as a critical practice of multiple time- and space-making. It offers modes of living and creating that resist the abstractions of capitalist modernity and instead propose a heterogeneous, entangled, and relational understanding of both temporality and material economies.

The epistemological force of craft lies precisely in this embodied entanglement: it teaches that cognition is tactile, that thinking is done with the whole of the senses. The hand's intelligence, the rhythm of repetition, the feedback of resistance, the intuition of proportion, all this grounds an ethics of making that unites the conceptual and the corporeal. To acknowledge this is not to romanticize manual labour but to recognize that the body itself is a political terrain, where knowledge, labour, and care converge. In the movements of making, the physical becomes philosophical, the personal becomes collective, and the gesture becomes a quiet but radical form of resistance.

Offering fertile grounding for these dynamic processes of becoming, strong social relations, and co-existing identities to flourish, craft contributes yet another remedy, this time against what Andreas Reckwitz refers to as the *Society of Singularities* (2017/2020), a concept at once positive and negative, occurring as late capitalism shifts from the production of standardized goods toward the valorization of singular experiences, identities, and objects. Beyond its emancipating aspects, Reckwitz underscores that the demand for singularity can constitute a new regime of value production, in which case craft risks (and actually already is) being appropriated as a curated exceptionality, instrumentalized within market-driven logics of authenticity and distinction. However, craft is never singular. As it embeds multiple traditions, social relations, knowledge and techniques, craft is closer to the concept of the *multitude* or the *dividuum* as proposed by Gerald Raunig (drawing in turn from Deleuze and Guattari). The *dividuum* enables us to understand craft beyond the bounded notion of the individual worker/artisan or the singular object/masterpiece. Raunig describes subjectivity as "a multiplicity, a partial field of division, concatenation, and ongoing recomposition" (Raunig, 2016, p. 24). Craft, accordingly, emerges not as a stable inheritance but as a *dividual assemblage* – open-ended, fragmented, and continuously reconfigured through material engagement, embodied knowledge, and collective transmission, a process rather than a

finished product that enables us to escape the overpowering threat of capitalist appropriation.

These reframings provide a set of theoretical tools to reconsider the critical potential of craft within art and design practices. Craft can be understood not only as a method or discourse within design but as a creative medium in its own right, which offers new ways of engaging with contemporary social, ecological and material concerns, providing a menu of possibilities as argued above. This extends beyond design practices such as collaborative workshop models or open-source fabrication networks that privilege the blending of old and new techniques, processes, and localities. Indeed, a deeper rethinking of craft as creative medium challenges its modernist positioning as inferior to design, industrial production, or fine art, and leads to a reintroduction of craft as a mode of inquiry: a way of working with materials, tools, and local resources that generates both objects and socially impactful processes.

Figure 2

Bilal Yilmaz/Crafted in Istanbul and Olmazişler Collective. Boynuz, 2014.



Note. Realised in collaboration with Eftal Akardere (metal spinning), Muammer Çevik (wooden lathe), Mehmet Keles (carpenter), Gora Kürkçigil (silversmith). Production video: https://vimeo.com/487761912. Commissioned by the 2nd Istanbul Design Biennale. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Such an approach can be found in the practice of interdisciplinary artist Bilal Yilmaz (bilalyilmaz.info), who in 2012 initiated the pilot research project *Crafted in Istanbul* (https://www.craftedinistanbul.com/en/), aiming to uncover the creative potential of the city's craft studios. Since then, Yilmaz's craft research has informed his work on both conceptual and technical levels. Examples include *Boynuz* (Figure 2) and *Fakir* (Figure 3), commissioned by the 2nd Istanbul Design Biennial (2014). Both collaborative projects seek to overturn the traditional image of crafts – an image that romanticises and thus neutralises its potential to respond to today's challenges. To that end, they employ traditional techniques to produce contemporary designs which are the result of equal exchange between artists/designers and craftsmen (credited as co-authors) (Figure 2).

Figure 3

Bilal Yilmaz/Crafted in Istanbul and Aziz Tavil. Fakir, 2014.



Note. Realised in collaboration with Mehmet Özer (carpenter), Can Savuk (spring maker), Orhan Soysal (wooden lathe), Ismail Yilmaz (carpenter). Production video: https://vimeo.com/487742467. Commissioned by the 2nd Istanbul Design Biennale. Photo courtesy of the artist.

In a more recent example, the series *Elhamra: Learning from Crafts* (Figure 4), Yilmaz draws on field research into the *çini* ceramics ecosystem in Kütahya (TR). Using brass, found materials, movement, light, and shadow, he creates contemporary variations of centuries-old traces of craft, echoing its slow transformations through experimentation with forms, materials, and techniques, as well as its dynamic entanglement with social, political, and

economic circumstances. Extending beyond the production of objects into the activation of social engagement, Yilmaz's long-term inquiry into craft has culminated in *CraftNet* (craftnet.io), a collaborative platform launched in 2026. Based on the participatory mapping of crafts across different localities and with the contribution of multiple stakeholders, *CraftNet* exemplifies how craft can support the collective production of knowledge, encourage thinking through making, cultivate a sense of community that extends beyond transactional logics, and foster new, de-capitalised connections with the social and natural world around us.

Figure 4

Bilal Yilmaz, Spikes, kinetic light sculpture series, 2024.



Note. Based on research on the current çini ceramics ecosystem in Kütahya (commissioned by Pera Museum, Istanbul), the artist reinterprets traditional çini patterns into 2D forms that become 3D with rapid movement, as a reference to the transformations of craft through time. Photo courtesy of the artist. More: https://bilalyilmaz.info/elhamra-solo

Seen through the lens of the theoretical premises discussed throughout this text, Yilmaz's practice illustrates how craft can operate simultaneously as research method, aesthetic practice, and social catalyst. Thus, craft emerges as an emancipatory methodology that can become a plain of resistance to the false promise of fast, endless, one-directional growth focused only on the here and now. Instead, through craft we honour the real life-cycles of human and natural systems. As our world crumbles under the immense pressure of capitalist

extractivism, a craft-centred approach to thinking and doing provides the tools we urgently need. Craft becomes a failsafe: a living archive of practices that secure multiple possibilities for the future. We advocate for craft as an active agency: empowering us to remain in a constant state of transformation, to build, deconstruct, and reimagine objects and social relations that evolve through time and space to respond to emerging needs, encompassing a past that bears richness rather than obsolescence and a future that ensures collective well-being rather than social and environmental collapse.

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