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Craft as Performed Knowledge

Embodied Practice and the Preservation of Craft

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Abstract

Craft knowledge extends beyond technical skill, encompassing embodied action, sensory awareness, and cultural transmission. This article challenges conventional approaches to preserving craft, such as archiving and documentation, by proposing that craft is fundamentally performative and must be conserved as such. Here, 'performative' does not refer to theatrical performance or performance art but to knowledge that is enacted through doing. It is important to distinguish between the performative, as the lived performance of craft knowledge, and performance art, the conservation theory of which centrally informs our discussion. Thus, we understand the performed and performative as modes of learning and continuity embedded in bodily practice. Drawing on the central outputs of the European Union's Craft Hub Project – based on qualitative and participant observation – and on theories of performance and contemporary art conservation, we argue that craft practices are best maintained through active transmission, mentorship, and communal 'making'. We highlight how preservation approaches developed for performance and time-based media art can inform new models for supporting craft as a living, evolving process. By framing performance as both the medium (the manner in which knowledge is expressed) and the method (how it endures), this work calls for a reorientation of cultural and institutional frameworks to ensure the continuity of craft knowledge.

Craft as Performed Knowledge: Embodied Practice and the Preservation of Craft

Attempts to define 'craft' have produced a wide range of scholarly interpretations (Adamson, 2007, 2010; Lucie-Smith, 1981; Niedderer & Townsend, 2014; Risatti, 2007; Sennett, 2008). Craft is frequently characterised as one of the most elusive cultural categories, and constitutes what can be understood as a 'polythetic category' – that is, one defined by overlapping characteristics rather than a single essential property.

Inspired by Zhan and Walker (2019), we follow Adamson's (2010, p. 3) open-ended definition of craft as 'the application of skill and material-based knowledge to relatively small-scale production', which accommodates diverse embodied and localised practices. Sennett (2008) takes this further, positioning craft as a realm of tacit knowledge that often exceeds the limits of verbal explanation – what Polanyi (1966) described as 'tacit knowing'. Such expertise is cultivated over long periods of time, through slow, sustained, hands-on 'making'. It is historically passed down through apprentice-based systems, where novices observe, imitate, and learn directly from seasoned craftspeople – an intergenerational model deeply rooted in specific places and practices (Luckman, 2015).

Zhan and Walker (2019) expand on this epistemological foundation by highlighting craft as a means of 'thinking-through-doing' – an idea that aligns with Adamson's (2007) assertion that craft is not a defined practice but rather a mode of thinking that manifests through diverse practices. That is to say that we align with the idea that craft a mode of practice shaped by skill, material engagement, labour, embodiment, and social context. We take a position that assumes that makers think through materials and that their knowledge is embedded in process, touch, repetition, and constraint. This embodied cognition has been supported by advances in neuroscience, which show that perception, action, and cognition rely on overlapping sensorimotor systems; philosophy of mind, which challenges strictly brain-bound accounts of thought and emphasizes the role of bodily experience in cognition; and by ethnographic research, which demonstrates how thinking and meaning-making are shaped through situated bodily practices within specific cultural environments. Recent work on embodied craft practice further reinforces this perspective (Nimkulrat & Groth, 2024). Crawford (2009) emphasises that craft reflects complex, multimodal ways of knowing, and Marchand (2010, p. 18) explains how bodily performance plays a central role not only in skilled practice but also in conceptual memory. Metcalf (1997) describes craft as a form of 'bodily-kinesthetic intelligence', while Sennett (2008) reminds us that reflective self-awareness is also part of the craft process through judgment, revision, and habit-formation. Thus, the tacit and explicit forms of knowledge become interrelated during craftwork. Gardner's (1999) theory of multiple intelligences and Lam's (2000) work on tacit learning both reinforce the idea that cognition and experience function in tandem in the realm of craft – an understanding that is central to how quality emerges in craft.

In addition to its embodied and epistemological dimensions, craft also plays a transformative role in sustainable design. As Zhan and Walker (2019) argue, craft serves as a form of ecological 'making' that supports resilience, systemic thinking, and relational ways of knowing and doing. They present craft not merely as a form of heritage or technique but as a dynamic process through which communities engage with materials, culture, and values in ways that can challenge and enrich contemporary sustainability discourse. Their theoretical foundation highlights how craft, with its local material awareness and emphasis on quality over quantity, provides leverage for broader transitions towards more sustainable ways of living. For example, at the Craft Hub Residency at the Glen Lucas Studio in Ireland, residency participants worked with locally harvested sycamore for their wood turning exploration. This material, connected to the local economy and environment, functioned in an agential manner. The technical requirements and local narrative brought on by the material guided the possible outcomes of the makers.

Craft is also deeply significant in fostering social connection and shared identity. Its participatory nature often enables communication across social, cultural, and generational

boundaries. As Zhan and Walker (2019) indicate, craft serves not only as an individual pursuit but as a socially embedded practice that cultivates common ground and collective meaning-making. In community settings, shared experiences of 'making' can facilitate non-verbal dialogue, mutual learning, and collaborative engagement (Gauntlett, 2011; Luckman, 2015). Moreover, craft functions as a medium for creating cohesion and social capital, whether through public workshops, intergenerational teaching, or collective production. Thus, craft contributes to the creation of resilient, culturally rich communities and provides a framework for inclusive, participatory knowledge exchange.

In our attempt to understand how we might better preserve performed knowledge, we find ourselves challenged to define what we mean by the very words. As such, we hope to draw an important distinction between that which is performed and performance as an art form. By 'performed', we refer to knowledge that is enacted through embodied practice – the gestures, rhythms, and material interactions that constitute the act of making. This sense of the performed emphasises doing as a way of knowing, where understanding is inseparable from action.

In contrast, 'performance' in the context of theatre or performance art implies a deliberate presentation for an audience, often oriented towards aesthetic or conceptual expression. While our discussion draws on theories from performance studies and the conservation of time-based or performative artworks, our use of the word performative concerns the everyday, situated enactment of craft knowledge rather than its theatrical display.

At the same time, we recognise that the social and cultural contexts in which craft takes place inevitably echo the stage we seek to distinguish from. Craft practices unfold within shared spaces – studios, markets, festivals, and workshops – where makers and observers interact and where gestures of making become both communal and communicative. It is within this tension between the enacted and the displayed that the challenge of preserving craft knowledge emerges. To maintain the vitality of craft, the enacted must remain both the medium through which knowledge is expressed and the method by which it endures – kept alive through practice, repetition, and transmission. This article engages with an interdisciplinary field that brings together perspectives from conservation, anthropology, education, and well-being studies. Drawing on these domains – and their associated bodies of literature – the discussion situates craft as a social, embodied, and relational form of knowledge, as developed throughout the following sections.

Craft Hub: A Case for Transnational Knowledge Exchange

Craft Hub is a European Union (EU)-funded initiative that serves as a compelling case study for contemporary efforts to support, document, and reactivate craft knowledge through participatory networks and transnational collaboration. The project situated craft within cultural heritage while emphasising its continued relevance in contemporary creative practice (Craft Hub, 2024).

Its core aims included the development of a digital repository that featured a materials library and multimedia content, the identification and documentation of endangered or lost craft skills, and the exploration of cultural differences in how craft is perceived and practiced across Europe. Craft Hub also investigated practitioner motivations and sought to test new models of knowledge preservation and dissemination.

The key activities of Craft Hub included 42 maker exchange residencies, 305 days of outreach initiatives, 7 exhibitions, 2 academic conferences, and 1 public-facing festival. These events were hosted by partners across Ireland, Wales, Denmark, Portugal, Germany, and Italy – including Carlow County Council, UWTSD, Design School Kolding, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Glasmalerei Peters, and Materahub. Each residency adopted a local theme inspired by regional traditions and materials, fostering place-sensitive knowledge exchange among participants. Complementing these experiences was the 'Talking About Craft' podcast, which shared practitioner stories, challenges, and philosophies of 'making' with a broader public. By fostering collaboration across national borders while simultaneously attending to local specificity, significant aspects of the Craft Hub effort exemplify an active and pluralistic exchange and a situated engagement.

The Craft Hub case study provided valuable insight into how we might expand our notion on the preservation of craft knowledge. It showed us that there is considerable potential for new and hopeful thinking emerging from efforts to preserve and valorise craft. By reimagining our value systems, prioritising the performative act over the archived material (words, records, images, and recipes), we uncover new opportunities for sustaining living traditions. When the performative act is valued over documentation, communities tend to be strengthened through shared making, thus leading to the creation of new social ecologies grounded in exchange and participation.

According to this perspective, performed craft skills and techniques hold a unique value: they are acts of transmission that keep knowledge in motion. Much like books borrowed from a library, these performed actions circulate knowledge among individuals and communities. This leads to digital archives becoming active rather than static sources, thus directing us towards finding performative knowledge.

Such an approach could also serve individual makers, thus permitting digital records to operate not only as repositories of material or technical information but as roadmaps for self-discovery and connection within a wider network. Ultimately, this visibility must centre on people – that is, where and how they fit within the living systems of craft practice. Otherwise, we risk reducing craft to commodified objects or isolated techniques and losing sight of its embodied, performative nature.

Despite its ambitious scope and thoughtful design, Craft Hub revealed a notable challenge common in craft-centred initiatives situated primarily within academic structures: the tension between embodied practice and abstract documentation. While participating makers eagerly engaged in workshops, residencies, and hands-on exchanges, many showed limited interest in contributing to the project's digital components, such as the online materials library or makers' profiles. For example, in the case of the research performed by a consortium member in Portugal, investigators struggled to pique the interest of makers for the more archival aspects of the project, whereas hands-on workshops were met with enthusiasm and waitlists. Interviews, theoretical reflections, and structured documentation processes were often met with fatigue or disinterest. This emphasises a critical insight: the intrinsic motivation of makers is primarily directed towards doing and making rather than abstracting, analysing, or archiving their knowledge. The gap between academic expectations and lived craft practice signals the need for more sensitive and adaptive modes of engagement – ones that honour the embodied, situated nature of craft without requiring makers to shift into unfamiliar digital or discursive roles. Moreover, the regular market pressures on craft makers can often lead to a sense of needing some secrecy. Whether looking to protect a process or to maintain novelty for future sales opportunities, craft makers may not be particularly forthcoming if there is a perceived threat to their livelihood. We also speculate that this may have something to do with the challenge of engaging the engaging artisans to share on platforms such as a digital material library.

Methodological Note

Our observations are grounded in participant observation and reflective analysis conducted during the project's workshops and residencies. This was supported by examining Craft Hub's resource outputs, including its website, the Material Library, practitioners' pages, its YouTube channel, and its printed catalogue. This qualitative analysis and practice-based research approach, both common in craft studies, enabled us to consider the interplay among the actions of making, the social interaction contexts in which the actions occur, and the more traditional archive and record keeping of such making. Field notes, experiences, and reflective personal records informed our interpretation of how craft knowledge circulates within lived, collaborative environments.

Despite its successes, the project revealed the persistent tension between embodied practice and digital documentation. While many participants were eager to ‘do’, they were reluctant to participate in documentation. This gap emphasises that craft knowledge resists abstraction and thrives in shared, performative contexts rather than being stored in static archives.

Figure 1

Delivering and Receiving Hot Glass.



Note. Choreography, temperature, pressure, and subtle tooling are all needed in unison for even the simplest of operations. Photo credit: Maria Bezuglaya.

Figure 2

Forming the Added Bit. Photo credit: Maria Bezuglaya.



Our fundamental discovery during this investigation is one of questioning whether or not we are centrally concerned with crafts as objects or crafts as processes. When we began to place some distance between the objects and the actions leading to them, we began to see potential clues for resolving many of our challenges. Simply put, we found that by shifting our attention from the material and more closely examining the social, contextual, and performed aspects of craft and its making, new possibilities for craft preservation and valorisation appeared.

If we consider a craft such as glassblowing, it is evident that it is not merely a technique for shaping molten material; it is a performance of knowledge enacted in time (Figures 1 and 2).

As such, the craft cannot be fully understood in isolation from the gestures, rhythms, and tacit decisions that constitute its practice. Thus, the fundamental knowledge is performed, not simply visualised or recorded. This challenges the tendency of many academic studies to isolate the crafted object from the embodied practice that produces it. Instead, glassblowing exemplifies what anthropologist Tim Ingold (2013) terms 'a correspondence of movement' – a form of thinking through making, where knowledge arises not from representation but from continuous interaction with the material.

Thinking of the glassmaker's craft in this manner enables us to situate glassblowing within a framework that foregrounds affective, pre-conscious, and sensory modes of knowing. In *Ordinary Affects*, Stewart (2007) resists analytical detachment in favour of an attentiveness to the 'tangles of experience, sensorium, and motion' that constitute everyday life. In the glass studio, such tangles are not peripheral but central. The body reacts to heat gradients that are not visible but are inevitably sensed; decisions are made in response to the viscosity and weight of the glass, which are continually changing. These are not codified pieces of knowledge but felt ones, emergent in the act and often incommunicable through any other means except through doing.

One of our authors brings over 30 years of experience in glassblowing, including decades dedicated to teaching the craft. For them, the idea that performance is central to craft practice is one that resonates deeply. They explain that only when certain parts of the glassblowing process (forms of knowledge) are internalised – absorbed into the body as muscle memory – can a glassblower advance to new levels of skill. Certain techniques, choreographies, and forms of understanding emerge only after foundational knowledge becomes fully embodied.

For example, one cannot simply be told how to rotate the blowpipe at the correct speed to keep molten glass centred; this action must be first felt and then enacted. Much like learning to roller skate, ride a bicycle, or catch a ball, many aspects of craft occur beyond the level of conscious control. Only when the turning speed, the coordination of shears, and a bodily sense of the glass's temperature align intuitively can one begin to notice subtle dynamics – such as whether they are pushing or pulling the lip of a cup while trimming it. Before that point, the glass often warps unpredictably, its form distorting under the force of misapplied intention. This is important because as one 'knows' how to perform a certain technique in the material world, its steps can apparently be known only within the mind. In other words, these steps are intellectually understood, but are far from accessible to the rest of the body, and even less so from the material that they are intended to manipulate.

Thus, to more fully examine and understand glassblowing, even academically, we must attend not only to the formal properties of glass objects but to the affective and performative processes that bring them into being. Then, craft is not a set of outcomes but a live, improvisational event (Figure 3). It is an epistemology in motion, where knowing is felt, not simply stated. To do this correctly, perhaps we could expand our definitions of what we include under the umbrella of 'performative', where the glass blower's choreography, the weaver's loom, and the potter's wheel are seen as taking place on a stage, with an orchestra, and in front of a socially and culturally constructed backdrop. From here, crafts, techniques, and communities blend into a complex, extensive web of knowledge that is acted out, going far beyond the confines of any single object.

Figure 3

Preparing a Bubble for Mould Blowing.



Note. The fundamental steps in preparing the glass for its next stages requires an intricate performance, with multiple players involved in blowing, turning the pipe, heat shielding, and opening and closing the furnace doors. Photo credit: Maria Bezuglaya.

In this context, we suggest that performative actions of craft knowledge be considered both the *medium* and the *method* of preservation. As the *medium*, the performative actions encompass the embodied, material, and sensory dimensions through which craft knowledge is expressed – hands, tools, gestures, and interactions serving as the communicative channels of expertise. As the *method*, the performative is the ongoing process that enables such knowledge to endure, through repetition, mentorship, and shared practice. In other words, craft knowledge appears and then persists through its performance.

Research and literature in the field of contemporary art conservation provides valuable frameworks for thinking about the preservation of craft practices that we draw on in forming

our position in this paper. This proves particularly interesting for us in terms of the performative, process, and social context of craft making. Conservators working with ephemeral, time-based, or socially embedded artworks have long faced challenges like those we encounter in preserving craft: both resist traditional forms of documentation and static archiving. As Domínguez Rubio (2014) describes, certain works behave as 'unruly objects', demanding care, negotiation, and responsiveness rather than anchoring in archived form.

This perspective closely aligns with our argument that craft is significantly more than a collection of material outcomes. It is a set of situated performances – actions and embodied relations that cannot be separated from the contexts in which they unfold. Like performance-based artworks, craft practices emerge through 'doing', through the sensory and improvisational interaction with materials and communities. Solely relying on photographs, prescriptive texts, or written instructions – which are central to traditional archiving and craft preservation attempts – can never fully capture the richness of the lived experience. Thus, our call to place more focal value the performative aspect of craft is to guard against a flattening of the dynamic and complex knowledge housed within craft makers and communities.

A particularly instructive parallel comes from Tate's 'Reshaping the Collectible' project, which addressed, among other artworks, the conservation of Tony Conrad's Ten Years Alive on the Infinite Plain' (1972) – a work transmitted through rehearsal and performance rather than formal documentation. In her analysis, Marçal (2022) introduces the concept of 'memory ecologies' to describe the networked relationships – among people, materials, practices, and spaces – through which such works are sustained. Rather than treating preservation as an act of freezing a work in time, she argues that preservation is achieved through repetition, rehearsal, and community care.

This idea deeply resonates with our view of craft as a form of epistemology in motion. As with Conrad's piece, the preservation of craft skills requires mentorship, communal performance, and embodied engagement – not merely archival efforts. Just as Tate's performers could not recreate 'Ten Years Alive' from documents alone, future craftspeople cannot inherit the full depth of their traditions only through static records. They need active, lived spaces of transmission, where knowledge circulates in the doing.

Conservation scholar Pip Laurenson (2025) reinforces this vision, conceptualising preservation as 'situated care' – a commitment not to objects but to the ecologies that keep them alive. Like Marçal, Laurenson proposes that institutions must become part of the interdependent networks of care that sustain such practices over time. Applied to craft, this implies that museums, cultural organisations, and policymakers should not solely focus on

collecting objects or their digital shadows but should invest in the performative infrastructures – workshops, residencies, apprenticeships – that enable craft knowledge to continue as a living tradition.

This expanded model of conservation reorients our priorities: rather than striving for static preservation, we aim for continuity, vitality, and relevance. Craft practices, like contemporary artworks, are best maintained through active engagement, relational support, and a refusal to sever making from meaning. The parallels with contemporary conservation thus emphasise our central claim: craft must be preserved as performance, not only as product.

We are aware that keeping the entire process that craft involves alive is not only against the stream but also involves extra effort and funding. Why should we do it in a time when high technologies appear to respond to most of our needs?

To this end, we argue that craft-making is crucial in providing a framework for developing physical and cognitive skills through tactile engagement, problem-solving, and iterative learning. These experiences contribute not only to personal growth but also to cultural and social well-being. As Kaimal et al. (2017) suggest in the context of art therapy, creative expression through craft can have a measurable impact on reducing anxiety and supporting psychological health. Considering its performative, embodied, and socially embedded character, craft is increasingly being recognised as an instrument for health and well-being. A growing body of research highlights how engaging in craft activities can positively affect individuals' mental and physical health across the lifespan. These benefits range from stress reduction and enhanced cognitive focus to increased self-efficacy and emotional resilience. Pöllänen (2015) emphasises the therapeutic dimensions of crafting, noting how it fosters a sense of personal achievement, empowerment, and inner calm. Similarly, Kaimal et al. (2017) document the role of artistic and craft practices in promoting psychological well-being, particularly when employed in therapeutic contexts. Crafting also provides structured, goal-oriented engagement that supports both cognitive stimulation and manual dexterity, particularly among older adults (Kenning, 2015). These qualities position it as a valuable activity for healthy aging. In education and child development, research has also explored how craft-based practices can support engagement and well-being (Kaimal et al., 2017; Pöllänen, 2015). Thus, craft is more than a pastime – it is a tool for care, agency, and connection.

If we accept that craft is best and necessarily preserved through practice, then it follows that we must create more opportunities for it to be performed (Figures 4 and 5). This implies designing spaces – material, social, and institutional – where craft can unfold, be shared, and

evolve. Workshops, residencies, and community studios are vital platforms for such engagement (Brookfield Craft Centre, n.d.; Penland School of Craft, n.d.). Such platforms enable makers to transmit embodied knowledge directly, across generations and cultures, through the immediacy of co-presence and the act of making a craft together.

Figure 4

Initial Turning of a Green Wood Bowl While a Photographer Records the Task. Photo credit: Robert Wiley.



Figure 5

Fine tuning the internal shape of a bowl. Figure 5 begs the question: can we access the Craftperson's knowledge through imagery alone? Photo credit: Robert Wiley.



Education is another powerful platform for the living transmission of craft. In Nordic countries, the Sloyd system has long emphasised learning through making, framing craft as an epistemological and developmental tool rather than a mere vocational skill (The Sloyd Experience, 2023). Originating in Sweden and spreading across Scandinavia and beyond, it treated making by hand as a core method of intellectual and personal development. Even in an evolved form, The Sloyd system survives most visibly in Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland through compulsory school subjects centred on craft, woodwork, textiles, design, and material literacy, where learning by making remains a core pedagogical principle. Its influence also appears in maker education, experiential learning, Montessori-

style handwork, design-and-technology curricula, and contemporary craft-based pedagogy, even when the name “Sloyd” is no longer used. More recently, Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) education has embraced craft practices as part of integrated learning, recognising that handwork supports creativity, spatial reasoning, and collaborative problem-solving (Smithsonian Folklife, 2023). Such educational frameworks reaffirm the cultural and cognitive significance of craft in contemporary society.

However, sustaining such spaces requires funding models that prioritise process over product. In this regard, cultural policy and public investment play an essential role, as seen in models like France’s Aillagon Law, which provides tax incentives for corporate support of the arts (Financial Times, 2024), or through public initiatives such as the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis, which has disbursed over $100 million to support creative practice (Our Creative Future, 2023). By investing in settings that facilitate performative, relational, and pedagogical forms of craft, its continued life is supported – not as heritage to be frozen, but as culture in motion.

Conclusion

Preserving craft as a living, performative practice requires a paradigmatic shift from static archiving to situated engagement. Rather than isolating craft objects from the bodies and contexts that produce them, we must foster environments that support the continual transmission, improvisation, and community memory of craft. Craft is not simply heritage to be saved; it is knowledge to be lived. Drawing from conservation practices in contemporary art, particularly those informed by ‘memory ecologies’, we proposed that performance and relational care are foundational to sustaining craft traditions. Institutions, educators, and policymakers must prioritise process over product, thereby making room for workshops, residencies, and participatory networks that enable embodied knowledge to flourish. Craft, when seen through this lens, becomes not only a cultural expression but also a medium for health, sustainability, education, and social cohesion. Its survival and relevance depend on our ability to value the performed over the preserved, the enacted over the recorded, and the communal over the commodified.

It is important to acknowledge that the research presented in this article is necessarily limited. The Craft Hub European Union project, which we use as our case study, cannot be considered an exhaustive investigation. Craft, its knowledge, and its practitioners span distances that far exceed our ability to document and examine. Nonetheless, we believe that by situating craft practice as a form of performative knowledge that flows between materials, bodies, tools, cultures, and time, we stand a better chance of understanding, defining, and preserving the characteristics of these complex practices. From this position,

we hope that the richness of their varied components and influences may be better sustained for future generations through continued practice.

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