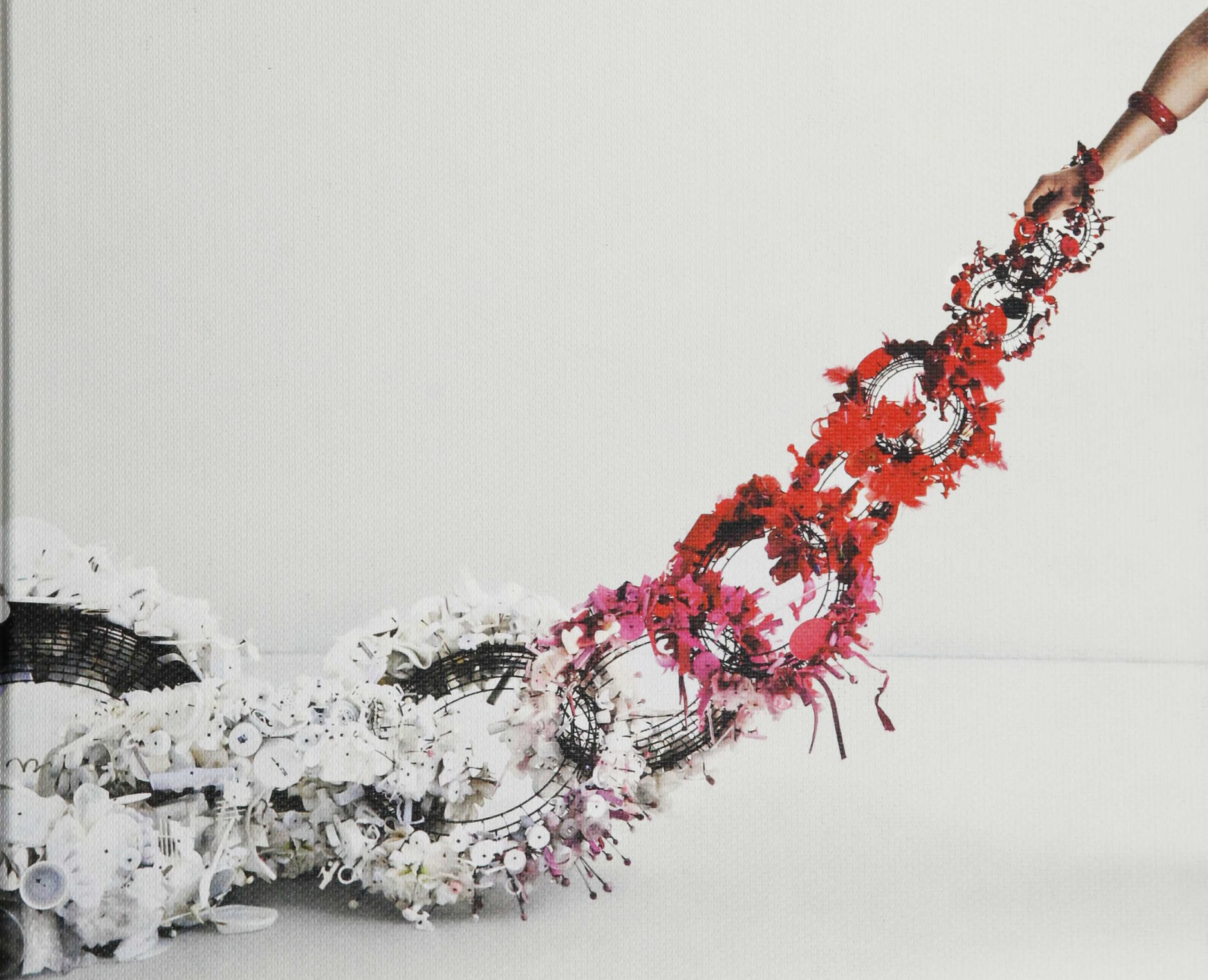


crafted:  
objects in flux



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## THE OBJECT IN FLUX

Dramatic shifts have taken place across the landscape of contemporary craft in recent years. In the past the beautiful object was seen as the core of craft, an example of an artist's mastery and indisputably the outcome of a practice that privileges skill, handwork, and time.<sup>1</sup> Both functional and nonfunctional crafted objects—from the thrown ceramic vessel to the hammered silver pendant to the blown-glass sculpture—can be considered material “things” that are visible, tangible, unambiguous, and relatively stable in form. Moreover, the philosophical understanding that an object is a thing observed—in contrast to a subject that takes action and observes—places that object, no matter how beautiful, engaging, or thought provoking it may be, in a fundamentally passive position.

Today, however, many artists working with media and forms traditionally associated with craft, such as fiber, clay, metals, glass, wood, furniture, and jewelry, are engaging an expanded range of materials, conceptual practices, ways of making, and modes of display. Likewise, the language and values inherent in or applied to craft are increasingly intertwined with those of art, fashion, and design, raising questions about the usefulness of differentiating between these areas of practice, rather than embracing the new hybrids.

As the conversation about craft has become more interdisciplinary, the very notion of autonomous, unchangeable, and docile objects has shifted toward the consideration of crafted objects as informing and being informed by larger practice. Art critic Edward Lucie-Smith observed presciently in 1981 that “the word ‘craft’ is, like so many important words in English, brief, pungent, and ambiguous.”<sup>2</sup> Though written in a different context, it is an apt description for the current craft landscape. Ambiguity is key to the conceptual

and material flux paramount to many artists today. Recent artistic explorations in media and forms historically considered craft look to the ways a made object—a construct that is essentially static—can exist in a state of unceasing change, or simply without resolution of its form, structure, or meaning. These ambiguities mirror a seeming dissolution of boundaries around the broader craft field, while the “pungency” of that field continues to attract artists who find conceptual and visual purpose in placing accomplished making at the center of their explorations.

Accompanying the sense of limitless possibility that emerges from this broad and blurred vision for the use of craft are concerns, by both artists and critics, about the meaning of discrete material properties and media specificity. Also in question is the ongoing relevance of traditionally understood markers such as virtuosic and dedicated skill, visible handwork and tactility, functionality, and associations with beauty, domesticity, and decoration. Many artists address these concerns head-on through artworks that cultivate a productive and complicated relationship to craft's pasts by integrating new and old technologies and forms seamlessly, and drawing our attention to moments in the history of the field that might deviate from standard narratives of why the use of craft matters within art making. Simultaneously empowered and unburdened by these pasts, these artists demonstrate the vitality and viability of choosing skilled craft as a strategy for contemporary artistic practice. At the same time, they resist the notion of craft as a bounded set of parameters with a specific hierarchy of values, and instead seek to destabilize, engage, and activate the object in unconventional ways. The lack of categorical resolution is a defining quality of contemporary craft, and it offers

artists the freedom and flexibility to explore the multifaceted material and conceptual capabilities of craft-focused practices and to productively engage the notion of the object in flux. Looking at the diversity of possible approaches to these impulses through three lenses—the re-tooled object, the performative object, and the immersive object—shows a field that is inclusive, provocative, and unafraid of the uncertainty that occurs when craft runs counter to our expectations of it.

Skilled making by hand is crucially important to craft-based contemporary artists, yet their methods and tools rarely remain static. Even so, craft has a long-standing association with reactionary behavior in the face of change and is often considered the most tradition-bound area of artistic production. One narrative holds that the primary role of craft, as opposed to art, is indeed to preserve past modes of making, placing emphasis on the cultural, aesthetic, and historical significance of certain material practices amid rapidly changing fashions. Knowledge of complicated and transformative material practices, tied to and passed down through tradition, has long been the basis for a variety of aesthetic languages—folk, vernacular, historicized—that guide popular understandings of craft and its objects.

The international Arts and Crafts movement of the nineteenth century, for example, coalesced in a concerted looking-back to historical modes of making as a way to escape the mental, physical, and environmental stresses caused by the massive changes in design and production as a result of the industrial revolution. Figures such as the polymath artist, writer, and political thinker William Morris and the art critic John Ruskin—avowed and justified skeptics of the machine—laid the foundations for a conception of modern craft that rejected the tool as potentially dehumanizing and prized work made by the unadulterated hand, a view that continues to inform how we think about and value craft. And yet, innovation in craft has often come about by artists expanding the physical and conceptual possibilities of a material through tools such as the lathe, the potter's wheel, and the soldering iron; each of these tools has a different proximity to the artist's hand and, though worked and reworked over time, was at one point a new technology. Although the state-of-the-art lathe of the twenty-first century does not

resemble its eighteenth-century counterpart, the turned wooden vessel it produces is considered as handmade as any of its predecessors.<sup>3</sup>

The assumed relationship and relative hierarchy of value between the handmade and the machined have recently come under increased reexamination by both artists and historians. For example, craft scholar Glenn Adamson, in *The Invention of Craft* (2013), seeks to complicate the narrative that positions craft as antithetical to mechanical progress by highlighting a parallel account of innovation in nineteenth-century England that shows industry's greatest accomplishments as reliant on its partnership with craft, defined broadly.<sup>4</sup> It proposes a broader perspective in which craft and the tool might be considered less oppositionally, acknowledging that the intersections of collaboration between handwork and modes of industrial production are what begat today's vibrant craft landscape.

The idea of a perpetual re-tooling is well suited to this broader view and to the realities of how craft practices vary in response to technological advancement. It allows for a language, not of opposition or unilateral replacement that leaves no room for tradition, but of adaptation. In recent decades, there has been an unprecedented shift in the types and number of tools available to artists, and not just to those deeply engaged with craft. The accessibility and use of tools such as computer-aided design (CAD) and fabrication have had a profound impact on both the planning and the execution of craft-based work, becoming in many ways as integral to the practice of many artists as are the chisel, the lathe, and the soldering iron. Viewed within the larger trajectory of craft's history, tools such as digital laser cutters, milling machines, and 3D printers are logical, even comfortable, extensions of their analog predecessors. Modes of making and their subsequent re-toolings can be situated together on an extended, nonhierarchical continuum.

Concurrently with this "new industrial revolution" in craft,<sup>5</sup> artists continue to do something they have always done: push the boundaries of how an object might be made, with or without the aid of newly developed or available technologies. They may re-tool material practices through the development of new fabrication methods—ones that might have been possible years earlier in a purely technological sense,



Fig. 1. Jonathan Keep creates a clay vase using a 3D printer.

but that now converse in the language of contemporary artistic practice. Or they may incorporate techniques more commonly seen outside the realm of craft, such as photography, video, and other types of digital imaging (fig. 1), or even make objects that remain in the digital sphere. Emerging from these efforts are artworks along a spectrum of making—as well as museum and gallery exhibitions, historical and critical writing, and other forms of commentary—that address craft as a material practice, conceptual construct, or visual reference.

Whether material, digital, or mechanical, the re-tooling of modes of making allows for shifts in expressive capacity as artists draw upon both historical and contemporary technologies for the exploration of new ideas. New possibilities for craft already have arisen from artists writing their own software, building and modifying their own making machines, or adjusting the chemistry of the materials with which they work (fig. 2). The re-tooled craft object stands in a state of perpetual flux between past traditions and future innovations. As the authors of the “(Affective) Craft Manifesto” recently proposed, “Materials are neither silent nor passive; matter has both history and agency.”<sup>6</sup>

Agency, or the capacity to act in the world, is tied to the idea of the ambiguous object; the moment we start to think of objects and materials as having agency in both the making process and while on display, they take on the role of actor or narrator. Process can be a type of theater, and it has been utilized and exploited for its conceptual capacity by craft-based artists, who at times move even into the realm of performance art. We might think of the dance of weaver, thread, and loom, with arms and feet moving in rhythm to make sure warp and weft come together as one; or the careful choreography of glassblowing in the hot shop, with the entire team ready to anticipate every move during the transformation of material from molten to solid. These actions are so engaging, enigmatic, and transformative, both to the materials involved and to the viewer, that they are inextricably connected to the public understanding of certain craft-identified media-specific practices. As curator Bill Arning has suggested, “If we see a woven basket, we imagine its weaving. If we see a thrown pot, we imagine its throwing.”<sup>7</sup>

The visibility of process and the inability of the viewer to mentally disassociate it from the object provide a great deal of discursive power to contemporary craft-based practices.

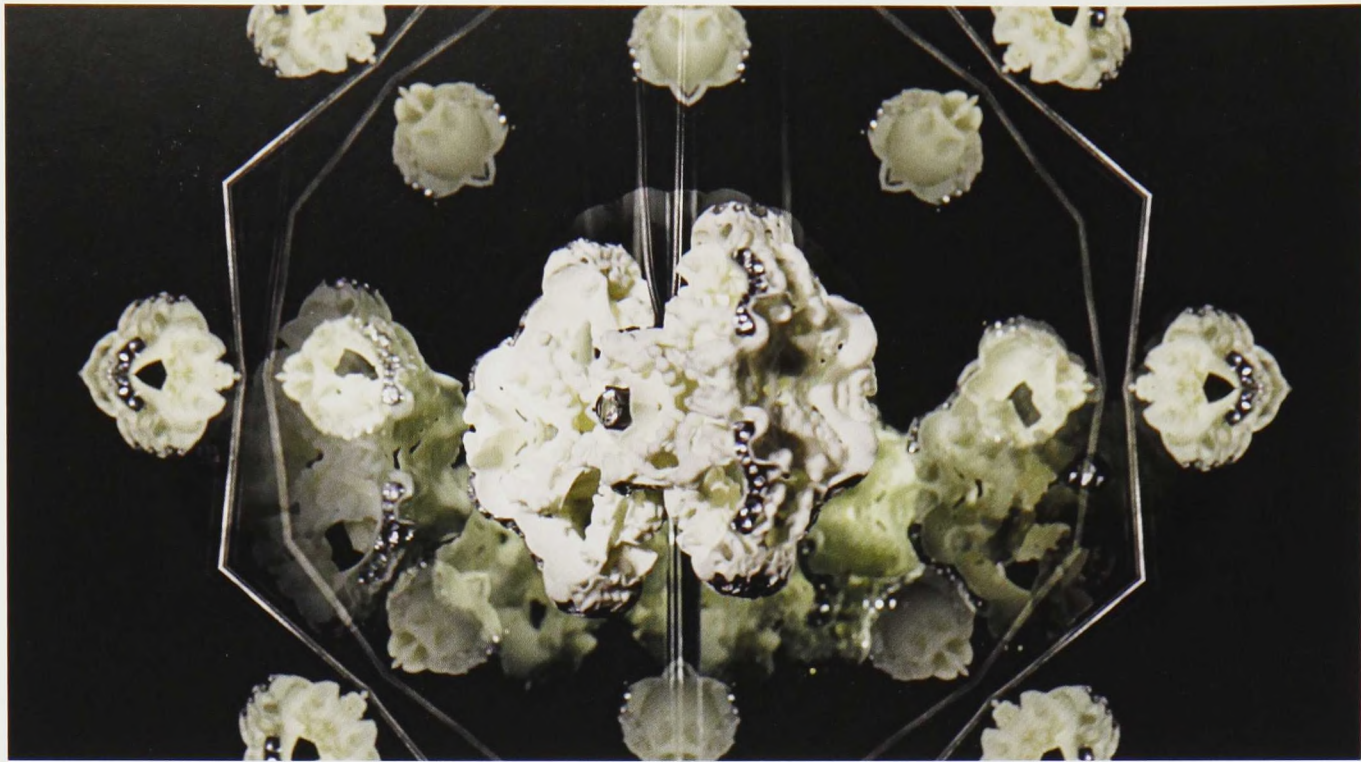


Fig. 2. Still from *Fractal Inventions*, directed by Laura Falconer, jewelry by Silvia Weidenbach (German, born in 1980), video (sound, color, 1:29 min.)

Nevertheless, the use of performance and an interest in spectacle have been essential components of craft for a long time, including the public demonstration of craft processes at arts festivals, World's Fairs, and museums. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, new immigrants to the United States were often called on, in the context of settlement houses and other reform-focused organizations, to demonstrate craft skills from their homelands as a performance of "living history" and a demonstration of their industriousness and suitability for American society.

In the middle of the twentieth century, makers of craft objects began to eschew traditional notions of utility to focus more deeply on aesthetics and individual artistic expression. This effort increasingly engaged the values of the larger art world, and some of the works that emerged—often termed "studio craft"—had a greater connection to the language of performativity and participatory fine art. In the catalogue for her groundbreaking 2010 exhibition *Hand + Made: The*

*Performative Impulse in Art and Craft*, curator Valerie Cassel Oliver identified a new positioning of craft practice "as performance art, in which process is viewed as spectacle and workshops and collaborations function as participatory events in which the object is not just created but also used as an expressive element within a performance."<sup>8</sup> Process art, which emerged in the mid-1960s, saw artists increasingly looking to the act of making to inform both the aesthetics and the content of the objects or events they produced. In Bay Area ceramist Jim Melchert's 1972 work *Changes: A Performance with Drying Slip*, originally performed in the Netherlands, the artist and colleagues from the Dutch art world dipped their heads in liquid clay (slip) and sat in a studio cooled at one end and heated at the other to experience the effects of the material drying (fig. 3). It is notable that while this piece is about materiality and the performance of process, it does not result in any objects. The making here is found in the conception of the event, the action of the bod-

ies, and the viscous quality of slip in interaction with the human form in order to amplify the “visceral experience of being human” achieved through the use of craft materials.<sup>9</sup>

Drawing on these notions, many contemporary craft-based artists have rejected the beautifully made object as an isolated entity and have turned to performativity to help guide a conversation about what the object itself can, indeed, “do”—not as a material thing that is acted upon, seen, and touched, but as an independent actor.<sup>10</sup> The term “performativity,” though now common in the discourses of a variety of fields, was coined in 1955 by British philosopher J. L. Austin in relationship to linguistic theory. In a lecture series at Harvard University titled “How to Do Things with Words,” he defined the “performative utterance” as that which, when spoken, does not describe but instead performs a certain kind of action.<sup>11</sup> If signs, including words themselves, can in specific circumstances produce reality, then they can be used strategically to enact situations or understandings. An adaptation of Austin’s proposition might be applied as well to craft and art: “How to Do Things with Objects.”

The functional nature of many crafted objects—the blown-glass cup, the wheel-thrown vase, the hand-joined chair, the delicately linked necklace—relates them to physical gestures and social behaviors that are performed on a daily basis. The rituals of daily life, from the solitary act of drinking one’s morning coffee to community-centered moments such as weddings and funerals, can be understood as performative moments that signal a variety of things about who we are or how we wish to be seen.<sup>12</sup> These performances depend on objects for their enactment and completion: the coffee mug, the wedding rings and champagne flutes, or the casket, to take just the events already mentioned. Objects in or implying action, even if they require human activation, help us to define our surroundings, move through the world, and bring certain moments into being. They might act even as they remain static; the coffee mug connotes the possibility of its use and the identity of its owner regardless of whether one is drinking from it or not, because it exists as a perpetual gesture that contributes to the construction of the object’s meaning. Performativity can thus be defined as the way in which object, speech, gesture, or bodily action produces meaning for an observer or user.



Fig. 3. Jim Melchert (American, born in 1930), *Changes* (Amsterdam, 1972)

Performative or participatory action, which often draws on craft's long-held associations with the body, touch, ritual, and the generation of meaning through social context or use, might be used to set an object not only in physical but also in conceptual motion. There are many ways to activate an object in its role as signal, even if the message is left intentionally unclear or unresolved. Likewise, a finished work might retain an aesthetic and conceptual focus on the performative qualities of the material transformation that brought it into being. In doing so, it moves the object away from stasis and into a state of perpetual becoming, caught in the act of performing its own making.

A similar fluidity governs craft's potential for interaction with and connection to the body in the context of physical space and the dimensional realities of objects. The inherent relationship between the object and space is often related to the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, meaning a total work of art in which all components are unified in purpose. The term was introduced in the mid-nineteenth century by the composer Richard Wagner to describe his idea of a staged work in which all of the individual arts, under the direction of a single creative mind in order to express an overarching sensibility, would contribute to the outcome. In the latter half of the nineteenth century and turn of the twentieth, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* entered into discussions of craft primarily in the context of architectural environments. It manifested in the desire of architects, designers, and craftspeople associated with the Arts and Crafts movement, Art Nouveau, and the Vienna Secession to create wholly integrated interior spaces encompassing objects of a variety of types and across media.<sup>13</sup> Efforts such as Hill House, designed between 1903 and 1904 near Glasgow by Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald, or the later construction, both physically and philosophically, of the Weimar Bauhaus by Walter Gropius were attempts at realizing the integration of the spectator or user into a totally considered environment defined by "the materials with which it is enclosed and by the objects that are placed within or decorate its exterior or interior."<sup>14</sup> These types of spaces are predicated on the expectation that our bodies will relate to certain objects, forms, colors, and materials in specific ways, and that those reactions can be utilized in concert with one another to create more cohe-

sive visual and tangible experiences of space. Even within the context of these environments, however, we are most likely to encounter the crafted object as modestly scaled and resting politely in concert with a cadre of related objects.

Similar questions about our relationship to the objects and materials around us are being addressed by many craft artists today. Shifts made by or to an object in space that deviate from expectation, whether in terms of scale, positioning, function, or proliferation, have the capacity to alter our understanding of the boundaries of that object, its materials, and the world around it. Modifications of spatial relationships and scale can amplify the inherent material qualities of clay, wood, fiber, metal, and glass, and alter common perceptions about these media in the construction of craft objects. Innumerable precedents bring such practices into direct conversation with architecture or show how they can function as architectural components themselves.

The large-scale, off-loom fiber works of Lenore Tawney and Sheila Hicks (fig. 4), for example, defied widespread conceptions of textiles as an art form in part by developing a reconsidered relationship to architecture and incorporating strategies such as dramatic upscaling and new modes of display within spaces not tied to the domestic environment.<sup>15</sup> This was craft at a different kind of human scale: not to be used, but instead to be experienced by a person in physical space, parallel with his or her own body. Artists such as Tawney and Hicks positioned textiles in relationship to their ostensible origin as architecture. For example, in the framework of the nineteenth-century architect Gottfried Semper's 1851 essay "The Four Elements of Architecture," the origins of shelter are explained through distinct categories, one of which is the "enclosure" provided by weaving, considered the antecedent to the wall. In Semper's account, when additional functional requirements emerged, such as the need for weight-bearing supports, textiles were no longer sufficient and gave way to walls in segmenting and organizing space.<sup>16</sup>

The impulse to relate the body to crafted objects recognizes the powerful influence of the environment, in its relationship both to the language and function of architecture and to installations intended to be experienced as artworks. Installation art—a term that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century—is loosely understood as a three-





Fig. 4. Sheila Hicks (American, born in 1934, works in Paris), *Bamian*, 1968, wool and acrylic yarns, 260 x 260 cm (102 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 102 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Charles Potter Kling Fund and partial gift of Sheila Hicks, 2011.474

dimensional work that is designed to transform our perception of a space, and often is specific to the place in which it is constructed. This focus on the physical site over form is one aspect that distinguishes it from more traditional sculpture. It also allows an exploration of ideas in space freed from the realities of production and an end product that many see as intrinsically connected to the functional aspects of craft (although ready-made commercial objects are often used as materials in installation works).<sup>17</sup> If, as many critics have suggested, installation art is to be understood not in relationship to specific materials or formats, but as an expression of a nonarchitectural Gesamtkunstwerk, then its interests can equally be related to many craft-based objects that display a similar commitment.<sup>18</sup>

Craft-based objects have the ability to influence, change, categorize, and define space, allowing such work to be considered psychologically or conceptually immersive even

if the human body cannot be contained within its space. Curator Michael Tooby proposes that “artists are invested with a special role and responsibility, as they possess the power to shift objects, practices, and meaning into powerfully ambiguous ‘liminal spaces.’ This power, even when expressed through different technical disciplines, is played out on the shared terrain of understanding materiality and how it operates in naming and understanding our world.”<sup>19</sup> Installation works that amass components, transform an area, refuse to adhere to expectations of scale, or alter our relationship to and assumptions of a particular craft medium are indeed creating liminal physical moments, and deliberately ask the viewer to think about the varied connections among craft, sculpture, design, and architectural space. Many craft-based artists actively investigate ways in which we as viewers can be immersed in an object, rather than adjacent to or presiding over it. Such works span the breadth of craft media and production, and can expand the expressive capacity of the unresolved object and, in turn, our perception of both setting and self.

The international group of artists in *Crafted: Objects in Flux* use modes of making, performance, and installation as matrices through which to reframe the crafted object, taking advantage of the flux and interdisciplinarity that characterize both craft’s present and its past. Often they engage more than one, or even all three, in a single work. This quality of multiple meaning is its own kind of flux, and speaks to craft’s ability—in the hands of practically and intellectually skilled artists—to be at once referential toward specific forms, materials, or functions while also serving as a conceptual framework and tool from a larger kit of artistic strategies. Craft today, as explored in the accomplished hands of the artists profiled in this book, is a living language whose grammar can be selectively and perpetually engaged, expanded, and refined.

# THE PERFORMATIVE OBJECT

Craft has a long-standing and varied relationship to ideas surrounding performance. Though the ephemeral and temporal nature of performance might seem antithetical to the assumed permanence and stasis of crafted objects, there is, for example, a sense of theater in the making of objects in any number of craft media, including weaving, wheel throwing, and glassblowing. Furthermore, the functional nature of many crafted objects—cups, vases, chairs, jewelry—is tied specifically to the bodily enactment of events, rituals, gestures, and behaviors of everyday life. Physicality and materiality are at the core of these kinds of performative moments, which comprise an active engagement of the labor involved in an object's making and of the object itself as an artifact of that process.

Objects may perform even while on pedestals and in what appear to be materially finished states. Allusions to and subversions of still-visible process may manifest in

works that stray far from expectations of how a finely crafted object should look and behave, as can encouragement to the viewer to handle, alter, and even participate in the completion of the object. Conversely, even objects that appear to be complete and seem happily resolved perched atop a pedestal or platform might be used as social actors in craft-based art practices aimed at building communities, developing ties among diverse groups of people and approaches to the world, creating new modes of social and ethical involvement, or even inspiring political activism. Craft has long been collaborative and social, performing easily in the world outside the realm of its own discipline. When artists engage the performative capabilities of craft—whether their interest lies in acting with objects or in helping objects undertake their own roles as actors—they imbue their work with an essentially corporeal and human quality, and set in motion the various ways such works can exist in the world.

# Sonya Clark

(American, born in 1967)

Sonya Clark has been addressing political, personal, and aesthetic questions in her interdisciplinary practice and fiber-based objects for two decades, often filtering them through the lens of African American experience and hairdressing. Each of Clark's provocative works lays claim to the idea that hairdressing is the "primordial fiber art,"<sup>12</sup> something generative that deserves consideration in the realm of the art object, and that touches intimately on race and cultural worth. This stance is paramount to *The Hair Craft Project* (2013–14), a major work in which Clark explicitly engages social practice, process, and performative action to facilitate the creation and display of crafted objects within the context of a community whose mastery in hand making is frequently overlooked and undervalued by those outside of its borders. By confusing the boundaries between hand skills that lead to an object (fiber art) and hand skills that lead to something ephemeral (hair work), Clark asks us to envision the two practices as equal participants in a creative arena whose unique value system is influenced, but not defined, by preexisting social and cultural understandings of worth.

*The Hair Craft Project* culminated in a gallery exhibition and juried prize, but in fact took place over a period of one year, existing as a durational performance as well as an event. Clark visited eleven hairdressers working within the African American community in her town of Richmond, Virginia,

and invited them to demonstrate their ample skills of twisting, braiding, and beading on two different supports: Clark's own head and a canvas primed with thread to echo strands of hair. Each hairdresser was able to showcase the extent of her talents in both a permanent and an ephemeral way, with Clark's head serving as an ever-changing, living gallery space. The work of each stylist was documented by photographing the back of the artist's head, with the stylist standing next to Clark in the frame, facing the camera, providing a human connection and authorship to craft work that tends to remain anonymous once it transitions out of the salon and into the street. Here, the names and faces of the talented individuals who created these works are acknowledged and identified, a relative rarity in the long history of women's craft, African American craft, and textile work in general. For Clark, it is important to engage the hairdressers "completely and fully into the dialogue about hairdressing being the first textile art form."<sup>13</sup>

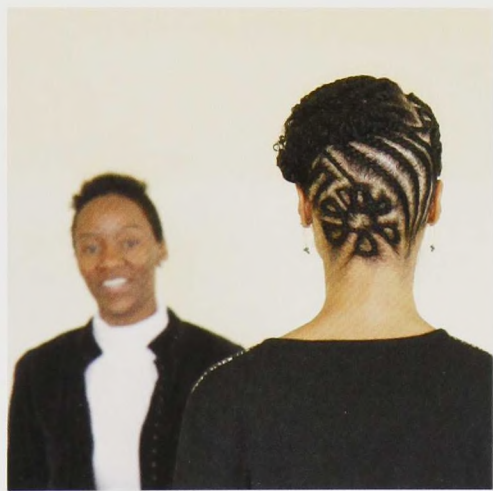
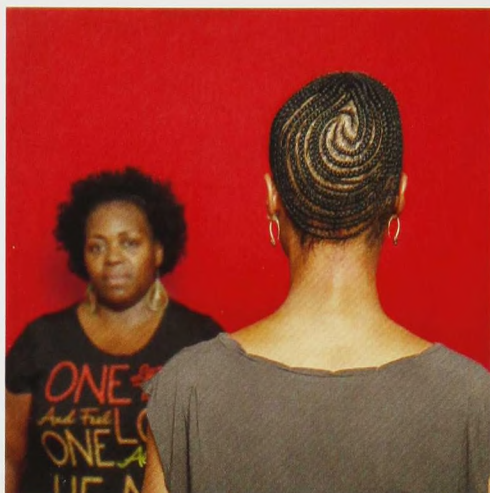
Once they entered into the gallery context, the hair crafts depicted in the photographs and canvases that resulted from Clark's interactions with Richmond's black hairdressing community were reframed not as bodily adornments but as art objects. Intermingling two communities, modes of judgment, and conventions of presentation, Clark asks viewers to consider the gallery and the salon as potentially equivalent "sites of aesthetics, craft,

skill, improvisation, and commerce."<sup>14</sup> During the run of the exhibition, the gallery became an education center, where presentations were given on topics as varied as popular representations of African Americans, hands-on hairdressing instruction, and the history of hairdressing in African art; among the speakers was A'Lelia Bundles, cultural commentator and great-granddaughter of the African American cosmetics magnate, philanthropist, and first self-made female millionaire Madam C. J. Walker.<sup>15</sup>

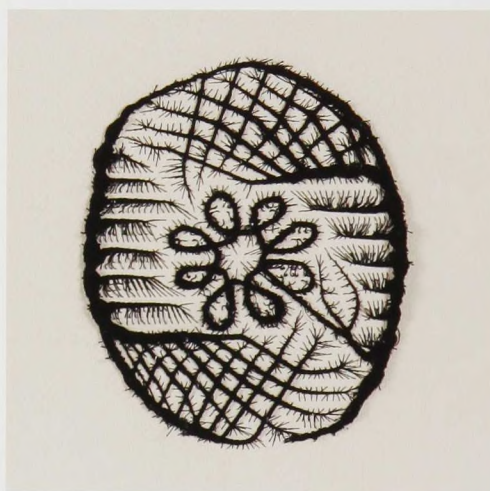
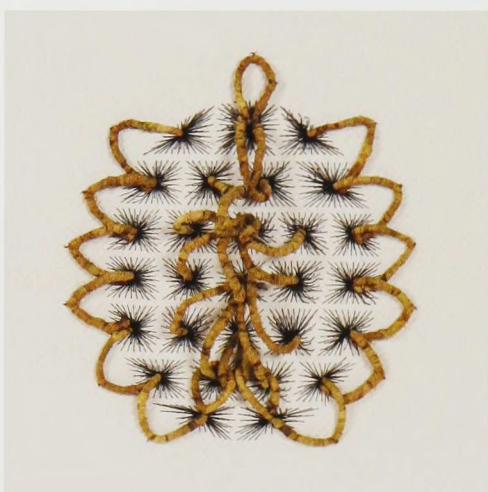
Departing from typical gallery practice, with *The Hair Craft Project* each stylist's work was judged publicly by a jury, as might occur at a hair show. Bundles and Lowery Stokes Sim, curator at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, awarded first prize to Jamilah Williams. A people's choice award democratized the process, allowing for the diverse audiences in attendance to engage directly with the artists, who lobbied for votes and distributed business cards to potential voters—or future clients. This heady combination of handwork, cultural commentary, artistic evaluation, commerce, and the confusion of rituals of making and display ultimately centers on objects that hang on the wall. Yet each discrete canvas or photograph exists only as a result of human interactions and public conversations, through which contexts destabilize and arbitrary barriers dissolve.



*The Hair Craft Project: Hairstylists with Sonya*, 2013, in collaboration with Kamala Bhagat, Dionne James Eggleston, Marsha Johnson, Chaundra King, Anita Hill Moses, Nasirah Muhammad, Jameika Pollard, Ingrid Riley, Ife Robinson, Natasha Superville, and Jamilah Williams, eleven color photographs, each 71.1 x 71.1 cm (28 x 28 in.)







*The Hair Craft Project: Hairstyles on Canvas*, 2013, in collaboration with Kamala Bhagat, Dionne James Eggleston, Marsha Johnson, Chaundra King, Anita Hill Moses, Nasirah Muhammad, Jasmine Pollard, Ingrid Riley, Ife Robinson, Natasha Superville, and Jamilah Williams, silk thread, beads, shells, and yarn on canvas, nine canvases at 73.7 x 73.7 cm (29 x 29 in.), two canvases at 83.8 x 83.8 cm (33 x 33 in.)

