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**Craft as an Attitude**

By Arno Verhoeven

The craft community has tried to situate itself in relationship to other disciplines in material culture, most notably with art and design.  As much as craft tries to identify and align itself with these other fields, it remains an Other, an object for contemplation by these disciplines. The Other, as a philosophical concept, is most notably associated with Jean-Paul Sartre, who wrote extensively about it in his 1943 work, *Being and Nothingness.* It is an important concept to consider when discussing the establishment of boundaries, as it concerns the relationship of the Self to something outside that Self. For this article, I would like to consider the Other in relation to the field of Craft.

I am a Self, a knowing subject, aware of my own existence. I can see things around me in the room where I am currently writing: a lamp, a desk, and a pile of books. These objects enable me to define my world. They are inanimate, changing only if I act upon them; they are *objectified* by me, the knowing, enabling subject. However, there are other objects in this room. I am in a library and there is another person sitting at the desk beside me. This individual is also an object within my world. For Sartre, the existential crisis for the Self is the realization that this object is different. This Other is also a subject, who has, like me, an independent view of the world. In that Other worldview, I am an object for them, like the lamp, and the desk we currently share. But I am not in control of the image that this Other has of me; I am defined as an object by them, and this creates an internal conflict. I am not able to determine or control how I am perceived and objectified, or if my view of my Self is compatible with the view of me held by this Other.

The crisis, according to Sartre, is that we struggle to maintain our identities against the objectified views of these Others, and the judgments they make that are not under our control. The struggle of the Self, or of the craft community in this case, is not only to define itself, but to fight against being defined by Others. For Craft these others may include cultural theorists and art critics, as well as consumers, government agencies that fund community activities, and even the students we teach. What we do is defined not only by our view of the world, but also by those with whom we engage.

**The Otherness of Fluxus**

Engagement with 'Otherness' has historical precedent, most notably in the avant-garde art practice Fluxus, which in 2012 will celebrate 50 years since its appearance.  It is a misnomer to refer to Fluxus as practice, as movement, or style. George Maciunas, credited founder of Fluxus, characterized it as "an attitude" in the 1963 *Fluxus Manifesto*.

Dean Hughes, Head of Intermedia at the Edinburgh College of Art, talks about Fluxus as "a strategy; a move towards immateriality."  Hughes' Intermedia department follows the Fluxus tradition, and is firmly rooted in the concepts espoused by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins. Intermedia, as described by Higgins, is

that space in-between, the space where work is often inter-disciplinary and mixed media, occuring between established genres. Such a definition makes Intermedia practice difficult to categorize. According to Hughes, artists do not make *art*, they make *artwork*. "Art is a dialogue, or a situation", requiring the existence of an Other for that dialogue to take place. The role of the artwork then, is to facilitate a direct experience and establish a dialogue about that experience.

If approaching immateriality – freedom from the object -  is at the heart of the Intermedia programme, the apparent way for getting there is through primary experience. For Hughes, this is about creating an "unmediated relationship" with artwork, which allows for immediate, personal access. This has a direct connection to Fluxus' *Events* and *Happening*s –situations that enable the viewer to have their own experience as directly as possible. The work becomes a pure object, nothing more than an opportunity for immersion, allowing the Other to make sense and meaning on their terms, based on direct experience in-the-moment as they engage with the artwork. It is not concerned with describing experience, metaphor or trying to establish a particular experience in advance.

**Experiencing Craft**
This year's graduate degree show at the Edinburgh College of Art had a healthy offering of work from the recently-formed Intermedia programme. The Intermedia work is allowed to disappear while bringing experience to the fore. The thrust towards immateriality, as described earlier by Hughes, reveals the fundamental difference in the role of objects between traditional notions of craft production and the Fluxus/Intermedia approach. Though craft has its roots in materiality, it could be argued there is significant confusion over how it comprehends material experience.

The concept of tacit knowledge, as put forward by Peter Dormer in the 1990s, places experience not in the realm of the 'Other,' but in the craft practitioner themselves. Participatory craft practices like craftivism or the DIY movement expand ways of working through engagement. However, tacit knowledge requires the 'Other,' the viewer, to guess what those possible experiences are because they are by nature, immaterial. Unlike a Fluxus approach, the material outcome has significant importance for craft, but it does not always allow for an unmediated relationship, as Hughes suggests.

**Between Experience and Social Process**
Within the design community, the notion of mediated relationships plays well into current research of the design process. Louis Bucciarelli's book, *Designing Engineers (1994),* introduces the concept of "object worlds" to the engineering process. These "object worlds" are generated through shared representations that frame the social practice of design, where objects operate as markers of a shared understanding in the design process. The objects in question, whether drawings, Gantt charts, prototypes or final products, help to frame a shared thinking towards a collective goal: the design output. These objects are not meant for only designers to use; instead, they involve anyone that has input into

the design process. This includes technicians, management, marketers, and ultimately end users.

The impetus is not trying to understand the 'object as artifact', but rather, to examine how objects serve to mediate relationships between stakeholders in working towards a common goal, with different understandings of the objects they are discussing and sharing. In this manner, these objects frame participant discussions and expectations. They represent something other than themselves and serve to develop common ground in a cognitive space.

Craft objects might neatly reside in-between the two spaces of art as experience and design as social process. Craft could mediate the experience of daily life through objects, as discussed between maker and user. This relationship is much more direct than with designed objects, and is more intimate than that found in art. The craft practitioner is generally known, the processes relatively understood, and the materials and objects relatively accessible. It is, however, mediated, unlike works in the spirit of Fluxus, which generally attempt to remove themselves to allow for the experience of the viewer.

Embracing 'Otherness' offers the potential to view craft practice and objects as ethos, strategy, or attitude, similar to the ways Fluxus and Intermedia artists operate. This strategy or attitude encompasses something beyond the object, beyond the practice of object creation in and of itself. This strategy encourages the understanding of the object as a generator of experience, but is critical of defining the experience or positing one as necessarily better than any other. All experiences are up for consideration as worth investigating, whether that be walking backwards, brushing one's teeth, or screaming into an empty room.

What emerges is not a notion of the sublime, but the understanding that the most mundane experiences that permeate our daily lives can be beautiful if carefully considered, observed, and made manifest by intervention. This strategy, this particular attitude as seen in the artworks of Fluxus and Intermedia practitioners, is of critical relevance if craft continues to position itself as a practice that enriches our daily lives through considered object generation.

Ultimately, what craft can learn from understanding the Fluxus method may be that the experiences of the Other are not something we can control. We can offer the Other a fertile ground that allows them to define their experiences for themselves. Craft may have transcended daily experience, but daily experience, both our own and that of the Other, should be integrated into a mediated strategy for craft practice.

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