

**Background:****Session Title:** What's Skill Got to Do with It? SNAG Panel

**Session Description:** Living in the long shadow of the ready made with the primacy of conceptual content often articulated through the handmaiden of hired or borrowed skill, why or why not teach discipline-based craft skills to undergraduate students? Can deeply skilled making as a physical craft contribute special knowledge to contemporary art? Or with the dissolution of many discipline-based areas within academia, should our focus as educators target the cultivation of ideas with making deployed as a subsequent undertaking? Do contemporary redefinitions of the “artists hand” through immaterial and collaborative skills dissolve the need for knowing materials? What are we teaching our students to be skillful at? For what end?

Panelists who teaching metalsmithing and jewelry design from across the Midwest will respond to these questions while reflecting on their teaching philosophies, forecasting how and/or what their students will contribute with the skills they have learned, and the potential of this discipline to be a relevant and vital way of thinking and making today.

**Session Panelists:**

Kathleen Browne, Professor Jewelry/Metals, Kent State University School of Art

Lauren Kalman, Assistant Professor, Wayne State University

Evan Larsen, Associate Professor, Metalsmithing, Wayne State University

Phil Renato, Associate Professor, Program Chair, Metals & Jewelry Design, Kendall College of Art and Design

Beverly Seley, Professor of Art and Design, Jewelry/Metalsmithing, Grand Valley State University

**Session Chair Kim Cridler's opening statement:**

Having taught metalsmithing and jewelry design at the University of Wisconsin, Madison for the past seven years, questions about skill have become some of the thorniest and potentially meaningful for me. A moment that foreshadowed these questions occurred before I even began teaching. In late August of 2005 I found my desk in the metals studio, and it was filled to excess with tools, materials, scraps, and ephemera from retiring Professor Fred Fenster's 42 years of teaching. I spent a whole day emptying drawers and sorting what I found. To my growing alarm what I did find were many tools that I did not have the slightest idea of how to use-and some were quite large!

This could be passed off as the meaningful difference between an educator like Fred with a wealth of experience with someone rather green. However it could also be looked at as a larger shift in the direction of education for metalsmithing and similar traditional media from the place of an honored practitioner of functional work who crafted objects of integrity to be used through established traditions; and a maker like myself who creates art objects that refer to this history and tradition from a more critical or conceptual stance and who's relevant experience towards educating today's artists lies in other areas such as arts administration and public art works in addition to studio work.

It was common when I was a graduate student in the early 1990's to dismiss excessive technical investment or even virtuosity because it was seen as intellectually shallow - surely if you needed to use some process or technique to further your conceptual agenda you could read about it.

20 years later, teaching at a leading art program where professors in traditional craft media were well versed in theory as well as contemporary movements such as relational aesthetics, I heard professors in critiques again and again questioning student's need to learn how to make the work they wanted to make - "Couldn't you get that done somewhere?"

What are we teaching our students to be skillful at? And for what end?

**Questions Prepared for Session Panelists:**

### **Leading questions about your program that might be folded into your opening statement:**

- Where do you teach and how would you classify the nature of your program – (a design program for industry, a studio art program, an interdisciplinary art community, a traditional craft program, etc.)
- Given the nature of your program what are the most important skills you teach (technical, theoretical, conceptual, etc)?

### **Skill & Time:**

- Much has been made of neuroscientist and psychologist Daniel Levitin's *10,000 Hour Rule* from his book "This is Your Brain on Music":  
... "ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert — in anything. In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals, and what have you, this number comes up again and again. Ten thousand hours is the equivalent to roughly three hours per day, or twenty hours per week, of practice over ten years."  
This is reminiscent of psychologist K. Anders Ericsson maxim that 10 years of smart practice is required for world class mastery of a subject, or complex skill, by a top prodigy (with 15 to 25 years required for those who are "mere elites") and is referenced in books from Richard Sennett's "The Craftsman" to "Outliers: The Story of Success" by Malcolm Gladwell. Does this idea spell the dissolution of traditional skills such as raising or chasing and repousse because of the steep investment and extreme specificity (in terms of production) such a skill can provide?
- Do we no longer have time to develop real skill? Has our contemporary concept of time eradicated the space needed to develop deep material skills? Are the lifestyles of today, marked by consumption, technology, and a refreshed interest in design, too fast and cheap to give space and import to the kind of high quality crafted objects that are the result of such skills?

### **Skill & Ideology:**

- Art has been forever changed by Duchamp's "acts of nomination" and a kind of artistic vision fueled by conceptual and/or collaborative skill. Much art today, if addressing skill at all, uses skill as material to be bought, borrowed or referenced, and traditional forms are quoted rather than created to engender meaning. Given this climate, why teach deeply skilled hand making today?
- Is the perceived loss of skill in part due to the shift in our discipline from making functional objects to the making of objects that refer to or reference functionality? Making a functional, beautifully pouring teapot with a well-insulated handle and good balance required a kind of practiced know-how to achieve satisfactory results, but to refer to that cultured object or the surrounding social constructs requires no such physical skill.
- Skill anchors us in material reality while linking us to the past through the skilled work of our predecessors. It is the embodiment of the basic human impulse to do a job well for its own sake and is empathetic, as in the writings of Bruce Metcalf, for its way of making physical an artist's care and compassion, in opposition to notions of apathy or a sense of impossibility that individual action can make a difference. However, skill is also ideological, as noted by Dave Beech in the article "Art of Skill" in that skill mastered and displayed obscures the questions of whether to do something at all, or to do it differently. How does this loosening of skills challenge the vitality and relevance of what our discipline is capable of making?

### **Skill & Technology:**

- It could be argued that refined hand skills have been eclipsed by today's ways of making through CAD and technical support. If so, what are the outcomes and contributions of technology to today's ways of making?
- Many consider that the manifestation of skill into material has simply shifted into skill in other technologies. If needed, it is argued, such hand skills can be rediscovered. Garth Clark at the 2011 SNAG conference reassured the audience that "all the glaze formulas are written down somewhere" and that we should be looking towards design collectives that are making smarter, more cost effective, more aesthetically interesting objects than the traditional craft fields. If we give up the 'knowledge of the hand', the balance between hand and head, or in Dorothea Pruhl's words: "Thinking in the material" is there something essential at risk?

### **Reading List as a background to the discussion:**

- *The Meaning of Making*, Bruce Metcalf, 1987
- *Abstracting Craft: The Practiced Digital Hand*, Malcolm McCullough, 1996, from "The Craft Reader"
- *Craft & the Turning Test for practical thinking*, Peter Dormer, 1997 "The Culture of Craft"
- *Art of Skill*, Dave Beech, "Art Monthly", October, 2005
- *The Handmade Tale*, Charles Darwent, "Modern Painters", July/August 2006
- *Technophilic Craft*, Ezra Shales, "American Craft", April/May 2008
- *Has Conceptual Art Jumped the Shark Tank?* Dennis Dutton, "New York Times", 2009
- *Out of Fashion, Out of Need, Out of Time*, Gabi Dewald\*
- *Designed Craft and Borrowed Skill*, Liesbeth den Besten\*
- *Conquered Time*, Love Joensson \*

\* These papers are from the 2008/2009 SKILL "think tank" - A European Initiative for the Applied Arts-other papers addressing "skill" available at [www.thinktank04.eu/home.php](http://www.thinktank04.eu/home.php)