

## Total Aesthetics 1 (Handicraft) - Shannon Stratton

# Total Aesthetics 1 (Handicraft)

*From the forthcoming Craft on Demand: The New Politics of the Handmade ed. Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch*

### ***That Looks Like Work:***

*The Total Aesthetics of Handcraft (part 1)*

For several years (2005-2011), artist Judith Leemann and I collaborated on *Gestures of Resistance*, a body of artistic research that led to writing, lectures, panel discussions and two exhibitions. *Gestures* was borne out of an interest in both the popularity of public craft (knitting on trains, craft circles and craft as a protest methodology) and the performing of craft by contemporary artists as a genre of social practice and/or performance. Taking an interest in the poetics of this work, we were focused on the why and the how of artists deploying a public performance of craft labor as the artwork itself, particularly what conditions were giving rise to these practices, and what this picturing of live labor might hope to communicate to an audience whose presence was imperative.

After mounting the exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland, Oregon, which consisted of 8 artists each doing a short residency and performance, we spent some time going back over the exhibition, our intentions and the outcome. Our original questions had centered around why craft had been a powerful place from which to express political positions, and how the performing of craft labor was being accessed as a means to communicate with an audience. The term “gesture” referred to the scale and longevity of these acts, an acknowledgement of the intimacy of most of this work that meant 1-1 relationships or simply small audiences and temporal performances that lived on in the story of the experience.

In a few cases, the story lived through experiencing the performance by participating (powering Carol Lung – aka Frau Fiber's – pedal powered sewing machine for example) and in others, through taking possession of a loaded object (like Ehren Tool's gifted porcelain cups with graphic images of war).

At times the exhibition was active, meaning artists were performing on site or off, their work being the literal performance of their craft (Lung manufacturing garments on her pedal powered machine or Sara Black and John Preus building out the “set” for the exhibition itself through a game of translation played between a wall erected between them). Other times, the exhibition was dormant, and viewers were left with only the artist's tools or the aftermath of their production, aka studio detritus. Each artist left behind the marks of their process for the

next resident to build upon, resulting in an exhibition that was always in flux, growing and expanding and rearranging itself as time passed.

As the show took shape, our focus was less on audiences who like to see skill in action than it was on the artists who used the performance of skill to articulate certain content. In an essay written for the edited volume: *Collaboration Through Craft*, we talk about the fragility of this liveness in the terms of David Pye and the workmanship of risk. The workmanship of risk describes the kind of making where every operation of production is determined by the workman as they work, the outcome depending on their care, judgment and dexterity, with the quality of the result always at risk. *Gestures*, as a series of operations that were being witnessed, seemed to magnify that risk, as those gestures became recorded events in the memory of the onlooker.

As we wrote the essay for the book, we reflected on craft's idiom, and what craft, as a performance signified. At the time we were interested in the affect of craft, as a transitive verb: how making under the definition of craft implied producing with care, skill, and ingenuity; a gesture that acted upon and implied movement, change, passage and transmission. How did craft as something that is done, and is active, translate into a way of being? A way of being that transmits meaning, or signifies a particular affect, not only through witnessing the making of objects, but through the residue of that making in the objects themselves? It seemed to us that craft operated as a kind of index, signifying the pursuit of agency in labor, a recapitulation of tradition or as a means for re-embodiment. Its reoccurrence as an important index throughout history suggested that it was called upon for all or some of these traits at different times.

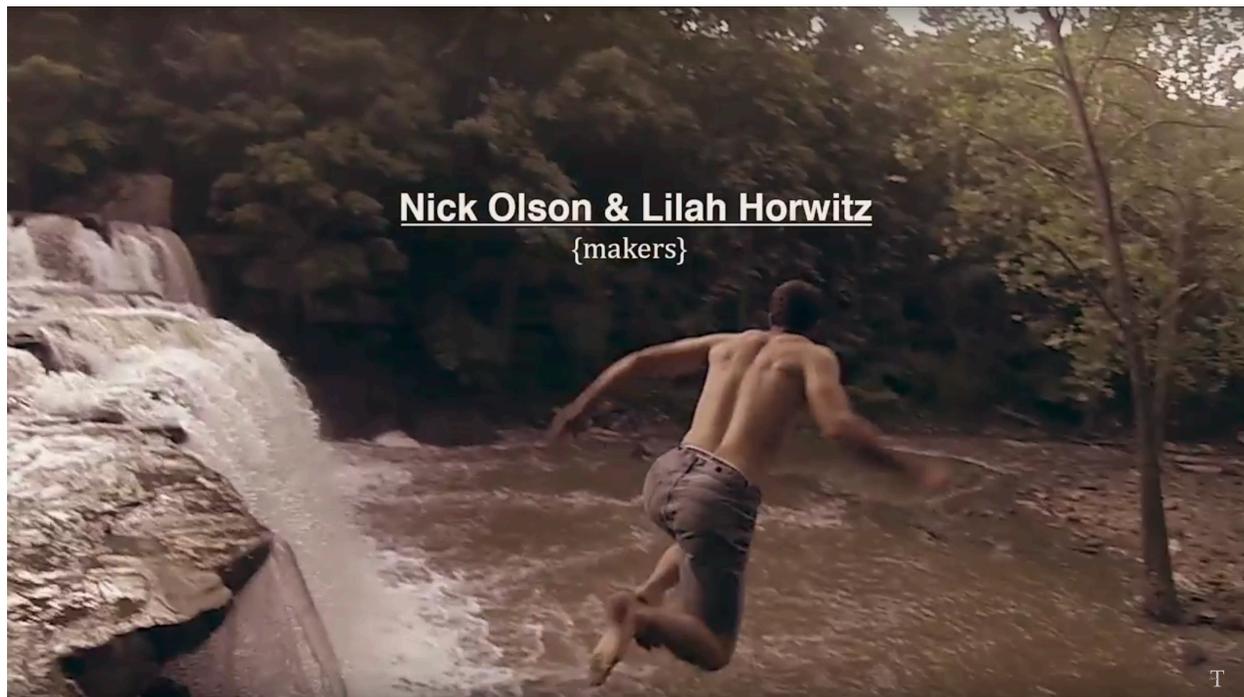
In general, there is less hostility towards craftsmanship and skill in studio art practice than there was 10-15 years ago. As affect, the somatic and the material have become increasingly popular frameworks for exploring contemporary life, while art has also been reinvigorated around the topic of labor: it shows up in an attention to craft as index; a renewed discourse about cultural work; social practice that represents everyday labor and relationships as aesthetic; and the performance of (making) labor.

But what *are* the qualities of contemporary life that have turned critical attention back towards labor, skill and craft? What is the allure of “hard work,” “expertise” and “hand making” or “making with care?” And what might their allure be as an aesthetic quality, one that is interacted with only through looking at and circulating images or acquiring and owning objects with this profile (but not making oneself).

I embarked on this essay in the fall of 2013 as a lecture for the symposium *The Deskillling and Reskillling of Artistic Production* organized by Luanne Martineau at Concordia University in Montreal, QC. I wrote it while a resident at Elsewhere, an artist's residency and self-proclaimed “living museum” housed in a defunct thrift and army surplus store in Greensboro, North Carolina. Surrounded by a grotesque number of things and embedded in the artist's residency – a phenomenon that isolates and celebrates the labor of the artist as special and deserving of extraordinary treatment – I (perhaps naturally) became fascinated with the overlap between the *desire for skill* and how that desire is reified and aestheticized as artisanal images, experiences and objects.

At the same time that I wrote the original lecture, I posted a video to social media made by the duo Half Cut Tea about couple Nick Olsen and Lilah Horwitz who quit their jobs to build a cabin on Olsen's family land in West Virginia. They spent around \$500 to make a simple structure, notable for its one wall constructed out of found windows.

The video features Nick, Lilah and their dogs, walking and hanging around the property, discussing their respective art practices (photography and recycled fashion) and the project of building their cabin. A significant part of the story is Nick talking about gathering the windows on a road trip from antique and junk stores, but the video blends their reflections on making whether about the house or their work seamlessly. "Working with materials and being hands on with the process...part of the reason I do things this way is the experience of it," says Nick while the camera captures him making a traditional tin-type. As Nick reflects towards the end of the video about what "title" he could give himself, he says, "sometimes the easiest one is just saying you are an artist." Here, Half-Cut Tea cuts to Nick leaping from a ledge into a waterfall-fed pond, the accordion and fiddle music swells triumphantly and the original title comes back up:



This example has a multi-fold purpose: first is the project Half-Cut Tea itself. Produced by two Cranbrook Academy of Art graduates, Matt Glass and Jordan Wayne Long, Half-Cut Tea presents short documentaries on artists, with new webcasts produced every two weeks. Perusing their videos, they have developed a signature faded film quality and melodramatic folk-music soundtrack that in combination give each short film a romantic and nostalgic character. Second, are the two subjects themselves and their project as documented by Glass and Long.

So why did I post this in the first place? I will be the first to admit that I have the privilege of

*not* being trapped in a cubicle, and do enjoy a livelihood where I usually feel a considerable amount of agency. But the majority of my work does boil down to significant amounts of immaterial labor, time spent on email, writing texts, grants, staring at spread-sheets, herding other cultural workers in the effort to produce meaning that often seems illusory. And of course, the infinite scroll: thumbing through Facebook and Instagram posts, only partially with purpose.

I also don't know how embodied I always feel, in my labor or in my free-time, and therefore I think I am as susceptible to the "dream of skill" as the next information herder. I probably reposted the article/video because I go with my partner to his family's land in Ohio each summer and only *dream* about building packed earth cabins and retrofitting trailers into idiosyncratic structures; instead I spend most of my time there either catching up on reading, socializing or simply continuing my regular work-life – just moving my office out-of-doors, since my office is really inside the MacBook Pro anyway.

When I first watched the video and shared it, I didn't think too much about how old Nick and Lilah were, or what they were wearing, I was caught up in my *desire* for skill. Not time, land or \$500. At 40, I can finally scrape together \$500 and I'm lucky enough to have land available to me; the things I am lacking are time and skill.

But the comment thread that unfurled beneath my post was intriguing: it eventually took to describing Nick and Lilah as hipsters, a pejorative, as I think everyone is aware, for young, predominantly white, Americans. Hipster also tends to imply economic privilege along with the visible markers of youth and race. Hipster is a powerful word in the American popular lexicon that can immediately void any cultural production based on a loose association of styles. And style is a notoriously unstable category. What was "hip" 15 years ago is certainly not "hipster" now; rather the term has merely come to describe an idea (as there is no real certain definition) of a commodified, re: fashionable, pseudo-counterculture that is devoid of the political. Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter do an excellent job of summing up how counterculture is the very thing that drives consumer culture in their book *Nation of Rebels*: rebellion drives the marketplace, because the market place is driven by consumers seeking distinction from the masses.

I'm sure there are many people who are uncomfortable with the idea that their purchasing of small batch gin, French theory and rare vinyl still makes them a consumer, but Heath and Potter are hard to argue with: the desire to stand-out and prove that you do not participate in *mass society* ratchets up consumption in general – across a variety of goods and services. And as they point out: even if you save your money, its simply lent back out by banks for someone else to spend. "Consumerism" they point out: "always seems to be a critique of what other people buy." (Heath & Potter, 105).

Most critics of hipster culture would (perhaps rightly) claim, that they are critiquing a group that is no longer countercultural at all; that unlike the punks, "hipsters" are not attempting a critique of capitalism through a bricolage of illegible signs, but perhaps instead, merely restating traditional American values through their consumption and remix of a plurality of iconic American styles. *Hipsters are not using fashion poetically, they are just fashionable*; and one thing that has become fashionable is the PROJECT.

While Heath & Potter may be right that competitive consumption is a process of critique, nothing confers more distinction today than the PROJECT and its implied labor. The project probably costs money, and is likely to in some way be exchanged at some point for something else (cultural capital, credibility amongst “creatives”), but it appears to take the attention away from traditional consumerism and re-train it on activity and authenticity. PROJECTS are what confer distinction today, and with that distinction, the subtleties of privilege, like having time, expendable income, or land.

Franco “Bifo” Berardi poses an interesting question about what wealth is in his treatise against the conditions of contemporary labor and the loss of sensuous life. He says:

“We can evaluate wealth on the basis of the quantity of goods and values possessed, or we can evaluate wealth on the basis of the quality of joy and pleasure that our experiences are capable of producing in our feeling organisms.

In the first case wealth is an objectified quantity, in the second it is a subjective quality of experience...One could instead conceive of wealth as the simple capacity to enjoy the world available in terms of time, concentration and freedom” (Berardi, 81)

The PROJECT on one hand is the very thing that Berardi feels has troubled the condition of labor in the digital era, that is the complete investment of all competences, all creative, innovative and communicative energies in the labor processes on the part of the cognitive worker who values labor as the most interesting part of their lives. The PROJECT (or enterprise in his terminology) means invention and free will, but ultimately secludes the worker from social and sensual interaction as they become permanently wired to their production. On the other hand, the PROJECT *represents* work done by choice, in free-time, and out of free will. It’s the work that is possible given a wealth of time and freedom and an opportunity for pleasure in experience. Nick and Lilah's only semi-functional house represents that latter kind of PROJECT, the project that appears possible only with a kind of exceptional access to freedom that is associated with privilege, perhaps the reason for the immediate association of these two young artists with a genre of style that has, as of late, become identified with privilege itself.

But with nearly 1.5 million views on YouTube alone (July 3, 2015), Half Cut Tea’s video makes it clear that there is a considerable draw to watch the narrative of DIY skill, even if the results are not a permanently inhabitable structure. The string of comments on YouTube are commonly expressions of glee and awe in the beauty of the thing or thoughts on the wonder of making something with one's own hands, counter commentary is few and far between.

Artists, craftsman, designers: they are portrayed as the makers of meaning in American culture, they wield agency over the production of signs. As Jacques Ranciere defines it: art is the recomposition of the relationship between doing, making, being, seeing and saying. The

info-worker, confined to their cubicle and charged with the movement and exchange of information, abstracted from the material world, finds in the act of artistic production the dream of re-embodiment. Given that the average info-worker spends all day on their computer, this re-embodiment is primarily imagined through watching it: the recirculation of videos and the re-pinning or tumbling of images. It is a virtual addiction to skill.

Perhaps without the privilege of time, and time to wrought skill, or money to spend skill on projects that do not create other valuable resources, or maybe simply, without the privilege to think and act poetically (and fail at poetics, as much as succeed), there is a desire building *for skill itself, reified*, and what it represents as much as what it can actually provide. A desire that reflects a hope to escape the mundane space-time of wage labor, and in the case of many American workers, the mundane space-time of abstract, immaterial labor that leads the worker to desire inhabiting the role of producer of *things*: the role of artist, craftsman and designer. At the very least, without access to the time, resources and skill to produce “meaning” in this way, the info-worker can circulate the images of this work, playing a hand in the production of the meaning of things as self-styled curators on Pinterest, Tumblr, Instagram and You Tube. Homemade houses like Nick and Lilah’s have the capacity to communicate skill, agency, independence and stability all in one neat package. And since these conditions cannot be “bought,” witnessing them (or at least their document) can fuel the desire for similar circumstances, with the image of the PROJECT becomes something to be hungrily consumed.

In fashion, aspirational brands are products many people want to own but can't afford, they come to signify wealth and power, and thus usually lead to knock-offs that eventually erode the aspirational brand's power. Aspirational brands tend towards classic elegance over fads, never getting old or outmoded. The “handcrafted” lifestyle has become a kind of aspirational brand, a soft-focus conduct that is documented in magazines like Kinfolk (a self-described “slow lifestyle magazine”) and Wilder, as well as countless food, craft, gardening and lifestyle blogs and Instagram feeds that document organic recipes, children’s crafts and artistic practices that tacitly promise better-living through the handmade and the artisanal. As aspirational, the handcrafted brand is about the dream of, the reified desire for, the PROJECT. The aspiration is to have the time to *become* a craftsman; to have that kind of agency.

While there are a multitude of products on the market with the word handcrafted woven into their branding, what's really powerful is witnessing it. Hearing the story of the craftsman and pinning it. Reblogging it. Recirculating it. From inside the cubicle is the desire for the time to make. From the place of precarious work is the desire for one's skill to be profitable. Or at least produce stability and dependability. Circulated online in the form of how-to videos, they-did-this videos and other recordings of the act itself, skill becomes *just the image*, not an engagement or test of quality or construction – quality doesn't matter if the thing photographs well and can and will trade hastily in the image economy. In fact, attempting to illustrate the “risk” in the workmanship of risk, the flaws and the failures, is closer to depicting the idea of handmadeness that is sought as a marker of authenticity. Perfection is for machines; beauty is in the imperfection of humanity.

Of course skill itself can be quite sophisticated, it is the *affect* of the skill that encourages its circulation – a cultural-emotional attachment to skill as a attribute representative of an agency that could survive or succeed under capitalism by being SINGULAR but not anonymous. Half

Cut Tea is just one example of work that clearly taps into this desire to watch the stories of makers, particularly with a focus on craftsmanship, and with a particular patina to the image and tone to the music that suggests that the packaging of these stories is pivotal in the cultivation and mass-circulation of an aesthetics of skill.

In her book *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, Sianne Ngai outlines the possibilities for an aesthetic spectrum that includes important categories that are otherwise marginalized in aesthetic theory. For her, the *zany*, *cute* and *interesting* represent aesthetic experience under the hyper-commodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism (Ngai, 1). These categories, Ngai theorizes, index production, with the *zany* being an aesthetic category particular to affective labor. *Cute*, not surprisingly is an indicator of a range of feelings around consumption that include tenderness and aggression, while the *interesting* is an aesthetic borne out of the movement and exchange of information (Ibid).

What aesthetic categories come to mind when we identify craft, skill, and craftsmanship? Agency isn't an aesthetic category, but it is this idea of the free workman, the unhampered expression of skill, that seems to be one of several attractive qualities. It sounds like slow labor, careful labor, and personal labor. Something made by a single individual in a small workshop, a reinvigoration of the singularity of the artist through their personal touch. In comparison to globalized mass-production, the personalized nature of one pair of hands sounds positively rare.

Even if people know deep-down that most of their factory produced goods were still handled by an individual, albeit an under-paid one who is likely alienated from sensuous decision making on the factory floor, it's the ideal of the handcrafted as unique and subject to flaw, as engaging in that workmanship of risk that Pye talked about, that draws the consumer closer. And this draw is not lost on advertisers or brand consultants. Handcrafted is now applied as a distinction to things that were not previously required to be articulated this way. Food and beverages are particularly susceptible to this term, despite being touched by hands since the beginning of time, with companies adopting this adjective to raise the status of their product.

As I wrote this paper I was teaching material culture at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and frequently found myself eating in the Pret a Manger (a global food chain located in the UK, France, Hong Kong and in the United States, predominantly in New York<sup>[1]</sup>) that was adjacent to one of our buildings. A fan of their pre-packaged carrot cake (it is surprisingly moist and the cream cheese icing is spot on), I started studying the packaging, a small box that clarified: HANDMADE for Pret a Manger. Looking around I found that the words "love" and "small batches" were everywhere on their materials from soup stock to this very carrot cake: "made from scratch, baked in small batches and popped into these flowery boxes."

Their in-store posters further personalized their products: "Mike" is their baker one announces: "If we were on 'Who Wants to Be a Millionaire' Mike would be our 'phone a friend'! General trivia, politics...sport, he knows it all. More to the point, there's nothing he doesn't know about *artisan* bread, baguettes and pastries, which is very good news. Mike is our baker. He bakes our bread fresh, everyday with sackfuls of whole grain and delivers to this shop before dawn. Genius." This is called, "Passion Fact no. 17." Surrounding me is also "Passion Fact no. 64" about how many months they train their vegetable slicers (3) and no. 57

claims that their only processing is washing and basic prep of their ingredients.

So *passion* perhaps is a marker of skill. If zany is an aesthetic Ngai points out as being indicative of performance-driven late capitalism, the language of the hand-crafted seems to work to tamp that down a bit. *Passionate* sounds like love, albeit a bit dramatic, whereas zany sounds totally unhinged. This articulation of happy productivity seems key to the application of “hand-crafted” or “hand-made” as a crucial product descriptor for the millennium. Even Chick-fil-a, the notoriously conservative Southern fast-food chain, describes their product as “happily handcrafted...as always” alongside a picture of a spotless baker's table.

Of course hand-crafted is a popular term in conjunction with foodstuffs like chocolate, beer and wine and frequently found in association with clothing, but it even shows up with some frequency in relationship to design work, a field that has already, if not always, been synonymous with individuality.

Manos (get it?) is a “Texas based studio, building handcrafted website, mobile apps, and brands for companies all across the Blue Planet”. Their url is “manoscrafted.com”. Under their “About” section they claim: “At Manos we're Creating, Crafting, Coding and Coffee-ing every single day” before introducing the staff via the header: “meet the craftsmen.” “Craft, Tweak and Perfect” is one step in their self-defined “wonderful process”, with an icon of a hand-saw hovering over the description of that process, which turns out doesn't involve saws at all.

Creative Market sells beautiful design for all, and on their home page and about section turn to similar language to describe graphic design work. They clarify that this isn't *really* hand-wrought in the old fashioned way by saying: “Creative Market is a platform for handcrafted, *mousemade* design content from independent creatives around the world” but like Pret a Manger, personalize the team behind Creative Market (although I'm not sure Mike the baker is actually real, whereas I feel more confident that this team of 13 co-founders and staff is). Their bios read like singles profiles and are accompanied by hand-drawn portraits of each team member. Chris is a drummer, indoor enthusiast, basset hound lover, beer/wine/whisky/coffee drinker. Zack hearts San Francisco, the www, good design, fine wine, German cars, American guitars, puppies, his beautiful wife, baby girl and the first Guns N Roses record. Maryam loves food, dogs and anything awesome.

What seems at stake here is authenticity. Handcrafted is short-hand for that. It implies personalized experience by framing-out a service or a product with narrative. The authentic looks handcrafted, skill is authentic, handcrafted things are made skillfully. And of course, while my examples range from a project that is not currently for sale (although the circulation of the Half Cut Tea video will no doubt increase Nick and Lilah's social capital and thus the value of their future work) to the entrepreneurial, to the corporate, the message seems consistent: handcrafted means real(er) people, it means passion, it means feeling, it means care. It is de-facto “good.”

Prior to encountering Pret A Manger's passion facts I had conceived of the SENSIBLE, both the ability to understand what cannot be verbalized and the showing of good judgment, as the aesthetic of skill.

The handcrafted is an adjective that wants to refer to the experience of the workmanship of risk in defining the thing at hand. The sensible understands this somatic, experiential quality that lies in affect rather than rhetoric. The sensible is earnest. It makes good decisions. And we understand the sensible, not just when we see the word handcrafted, but other markers that are aligned with it: wood-cut style fonts; illustrations that look hand-drawn; DIY making; small-batch this and that; soft, natural hues and finishes; recycled and natural materials; home-made food; homey touches; constructed and affected shabbiness. These qualities appear to set up dichotomies that situate soft, natural, rough and personalized as handmade and hard, fabricated, smooth and anonymous as manufactured. Handmade has a human narrative and manufactured is reproducible code.

The aesthetic of the sensible can also be traced to the buy local movement or slow food, a consumer aesthetic that is a kind of soft-politics born out of the Italian slow-food movement. Protesting global food giant MacDonal'd's, the founders so-to-speak, of slow-food, protested by eating homemade pasta slowly, outside of the fast-food chain. Protesting via what you chose to eat (publicly) became one of several possible individual choices that could have an impact on local economies and workers; De Certeau's practice of everyday life in action. And while this may resonate as a meaningful endeavor, to buy local, to hand-make, to learn skills that might lend themselves to survival, the message that one's choices as a consumer or laborer can have impact on capitalism, and thus be political, has been adopted at the corporate scale. The collapse of qualities like soft, natural, rough and personalized into a short-hand for hand-crafted, and hand-crafted into an aesthetic of the sensible and thus also the correlation of hand, skill, labor and affect with "good" makes the aesthetic of skill or handcraftedness easy to poach and used as a marketing contrivance.

A considerable amount of time is spent on conveying authenticity in a somewhat circular process: handcraftedness means this product (or the person buying the product) is more authentic and you can know the authentic by its degree of obvious or narrated handcraftedness. Authenticity tests whether something is what it claims to be, the search for authenticity being, as Lionel Trilling had put it: the anxiety over the credibility of existence. Perhaps this correlation has developed out of an attempt to "test" consumerism as a result of consumption being the primary way people have come to express themselves, and perhaps depressingly, their politics. Are these products credible? Am I, as a consumer, credible in my choices?

Pret a Manger and Chick-fil-a make it look *sensible* for you to support their sizable chains by conveying the personalized, handcrafted ethos that you as a consumer have been drawn to as indicative of your informed choice. If "Mike" after all is an expert on artisanal breads, and Pret a Manger have acknowledged Mike here publicly, then what do I have to worry about? I'm a satisfied consumer, and any real social responsibility that I should exercise has been neatly displaced by a belief that my purchasing power is political. I eat at a chain that cares about, no, is *even passionate* about craftsmanship, and thus, must be a more credible, more authentic fast-food business.

The work of discerning authenticity in products or projects, and primarily in the *style* of these things, as they are marketed or communicated, detracts from the work of discerning political forms and patterns that need attention by citizens. Fussing at the border of aesthetic messages can miss the importance of the non-aestheticized, socio-political world.

Nigel Thrift writes about aesthetics and the constructing of worlds as “spaces formed by capitalism whose aim is not to create subjects...so much as the worlds within which the subject exists” (Thrift, 295). “Worlds have their own practices of *rendering prominent*,” Thrift says, “giving rise to a particular style of going on that consequently focuses passions.” He goes on to say that: “The restlessness of the imagination becomes an asset that can be valorized as everyday life becomes a cavalcade of aesthetically charged moments that can be used for profit, not least because *every surface communicates*” (296)

I read this excerpt of Thrift's as an attempt to understand the contemporary fashion for life *style*. And not lifestyle, as say habits or ways of going about things, but life styles as fully articulated worlds of interconnected aesthetic decisions, with a particular emphasis on the aesthetics of experience and the PROJECT, for example, as an a kind of construction of worlds. Style, Thrift is quick to note, is not about checking boxes, but about a series of modifications to being that produce captivation. For Thrift, glamor is a key quality to creating allure, and thus the captivation that style produces. It is a term that he chooses for its dual economic and magical force, for meaning the “*spell* cast by unobtainable realities.”

In closing, I want to examine the PROJECT transformed into a world as it happens at the art project and residency, Mildred's Lane. Mildred's Lane is a kind of lifestyle art piece initiated by artists J. Morgan Puett and Mark Dion, but increasingly the primary focus of Puett. Mildred's, as it is affectionately called by artists who have been residents, dinner guests and lecturers at the property, is Puett's home on 96-acres in NE Pennsylvania. Dubbed an “art complexity,” Mildred's Lane hosts a summer residency program where students participate in 3-week paid programs, Social Saturday dinner events, and artist-directed projects. A trip to the Mildred's Lane website will reveal that all of Puett's work, from her off-site exhibitions to homeschooling her middle-school son are folded into the “complexity” in an articulation of a life style-cum-world that leaves no part of her life orphaned from the larger project.

The Mildred world is one of workstyles and comportment, explained on the philosophy page of the website as a “practice and educational philosophy (in an) attempt to collectively create new modes of being in the world.” She goes on: “this idea incorporates questions of our relation to the environment, systems of labor, forms of dwelling, clothing apparatuses, and inventive domesticating; all of which form an ethics of comportment and are embodied in *workstyles*.”

Students at Mildred's Lane, the site explains, will negotiate these issues through rethinking “one's collective involvements with food, shopping, making, styling, gaming, sleeping, reading and thinking. Every research session will be an intensive reconsideration of workstyles...(with) visits to alternative farms, discussion around food and cooking, cleaning and maintenance.” Having been a guest at Mildred's Lane I have witnessed first hand the workstyles and comportment of the site, where resident students and staff have adopted a fairly thorough aesthetic that guides their life and work, whether its their mode of dress or the projects they embark on.

In many ways, staying at Mildred's Lane is like staying inside an art installation, with bits and pieces of Dion and Puett's work throughout the property as either full-fledged installations (as in some of the guest cabins) or the odds and ends through-out the house. The home has cultivated a rather precise shabby-chic-meets-Victorian-study, with only vintage linens and

glass in the kitchen, a library overflowing with books wedged between jars filled with scientific specimens and admittedly, a delightful outdoor porcelain bathtub. Puett and staff drift dreamily around the property in linen shift dresses and drawstring pants, everything seemingly white or neutral or grey. One feels untoward donning anything brightly colored or patterned, as the environment seems to instruct that “good” comportment, along with hooshing<sup>[1]</sup> the homestead, is the affecting of a kind of anachronistic prairie attire.

It is telling that Mildred's is widely reviewed and written about in New York, for whom this nearby getaway caters to with its Saturday Socials. These events are a veritable whose-who of the East Coast art world give or take a few Western or European visitors who might be nearby. And Puett is truly a generous host in that regard, the door is always open once you've been to Mildred's, should you be back her way. But it is this event, in relationship to the residents and the lessons in workstyles and comportment that I wish to focus on here in close.

When I visited Mildred's Lane in 2011, the residents were hard at work building tables and lanterns, decorating the trees, choosing linens and picking flowers in preparation (along with dinner) for that evening's social. Ever the pragmatist, I wondered out-loud as an increasingly frustrated pair of residents worked out day-2 of a table design *why there wasn't a table from last weekend?*

“We make them for every event” was the very matter-of-fact answer.

“Are there no parts left over in storage,” I asked?

“Well we don't have much room for storage,” I was told.

And this was where I saw the full effect of the “workstyle”, the handmade, the specially, skillfully, hand-wrought as aesthetic. The experiential event that was the Saturday Social wouldn't be the finely wrought art-work, or perhaps in this incident, art *world*, that was being constantly prepared at Mildred's Lane, if a table hadn't been especially hand-built for that event. Of course, the diners might not realize this detail, some would likely assume as dumbly as I, that the tables were broken down and stored until next week (and potentially, since that visit, they may now be); but the residents, at least according to the educational philosophy, were being taught to find art in every act of labor and presumably joy in the aesthetic of simplicity, which is all that is possible on such a short time-table.

At the same time of course, it's hard to examine Mildred's Lane and not be suspect of labor made so precious and of students turned production assistants in the construction of another artist's world. While there is indeed something to be said in finding or making aesthetics of the everyday, this everyday is particular, and noticeably nostalgic for a kind of amalgamation of olden times, when farm and domestic labor was by no means this lovely. Mildred's Lane, in effect, by designing and upholding its workstyles and modes of comportment engages in a kind of glamorizing of the domestic labor and entertaining it focuses on. The Saturday Social gathers an already glamorous set of individuals to dine together for a meal, and the overlay of this set of individuals with the heightened rural worlding of Mildred's Lane casts a kind of spell. For most, this home-life would be an unobtainable reality.

Mildred's Lane is the ultimate PROJECT or enterprise, to use Berardi's terms. It *is* the work that is possible given the wealth of time, freedom and pleasure in every experience, even the domestic labor that for most are the dreaded chores wedged between jobs, children and other responsibilities. Like Nick and Lilah's glass house, there is an affected casualness in the aesthetics of this work, a craftedness that presumes accessibility, but they remain in the category of enterprise. In presenting unobtainable realities, aestheticized through the vocabulary of hand-madeness, authenticity and so forth, these qualities become a new kind of glamorous: the freedom to make, to be slow, to build worlds, to deploy skill for pleasure rather than pay, this is what has allure today. Coupled with the strange disconnect between the price and privilege required to gain access to the art world, and the extreme wealth that travels through it, this attempt to live a kind of a aestheticized simplicity as an isolated art-work itself, often fails at being either critical of those economic circumstances that make such an act possible or truly celebratory of a legitimately simple life. What results is a kind of uncanny theater, or as Hal Foster recalls in *Design & Crime*, a gesamtkunstwerk that "commingles subject and object." (Foster, 15). Referencing Adolf Loos' critique of Art Nouveau, Foster is wary of the total design of contemporary life, with the individuality of the owner expressed down to every nail. As Loos describes the man in his complete Art Nouveau interior: "he (is) precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring. He (thinks), this is what it means to learn to go about life with one's own corpse. Yes indeed. He is finished. *He is complete!*"

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[1] “hooshing” being the word-of-choice at Mildred's (that eventually infects one's own vocabulary for better or for worse after leaving), for not just tidying up, but giving your tidying a little extra sumpin-sumpin.

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