

An Aesthetics of Everything Else:
Flat Ontologies and the Everyday

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis considers everyday experience as the defining condition of craft that has largely escaped scholarly attention. Critically responding to craft's theoretical stance as the 'other' of art and industry, I turn to philosophy to examine how non-Kantian strands of aesthetic theory might enable art historical study of craft to encompass the experience of ordinary making. Through an examination of flat ontological frameworks put forth by New Materialism and its older iterations in John Dewey and Indigenous thought, I argue that aesthetic frameworks deriving from flat ontologies, or what I call "flat aesthetics," provide a way to return to a less fragmented creative landscape in which craft is the ground for all creative practice.

Drawing inspiration from art historical examinations of the counterculture and neo-avant garde movement Fluxus, I focus on how flat ontologies provide the philosophical basis for an everyday aesthetics that recognizes the ordinary experience of making in relational terms, as part of a dynamic network of agential forces. I conclude by speculating that understanding everyday craft in this way holds potential to renew its relevance and pertinence to the ethical pursuit of "the good life," pointing to new directions for further work to be done in this area.

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Introduction

This thesis is about craft, but not in its conventional art historical configuration. Here I consider the way in which available means of thinking about art preclude art historical discussions of craft as everyday making. More precisely, I address craft as a manifestation of a much more ordinary kind of doing and making (*faire*), that is, craft in the broadest possible bodily terms—as an everyday experience that traverses human and non-human realms.

For this reason, I turn to philosophy and the very categories by which we understand reality, our place within it, and the nature of experience. My thesis addresses the philosophical underpinnings of making in general and the ways in which art history's inheritance of post-Kantian aesthetic categories has obscured our understanding of what I consider a key aspect of craft, namely, its embeddedness in everyday experiences of making. I lay bare this problematic by exploring art history's relation to craft in the everyday and by revisiting the avant-garde's investigations of art-as-life as aesthetic practices. As art historical manifestations of the everyday, craft and the avant-garde indeed have always seemed to me to be inextricably albeit counter-intuitively bound to one another.

Growing up in the late 1960s and '70s, imbued with the domestic arts and farming practices of my grandparents, I absorbed a child's version of the counterculture and the heightened role that craft played in the public imagination during that historical moment.¹ My emerging interest in the interconnectedness of these everyday domestic practices with the “hippie culture” I observed was reaffirmed decades later when, as a fine arts student in the 1990s, I struggled to make sense of two related phenomena arising at the opposite ends of a dialectical spectrum. The first concerned the aspirations of craft to attain fine art status, a desire that seemed

¹ Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner, introduction to *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xxxiv.

to me to be misplaced. It struck me then that a nascent craft discourse missed the crucial point—namely, that craft, the decorative arts and so on were part of a human enterprise vastly larger, more important, yet less “precious” than what my academic environment labeled and valued as art. The second was a new wave of participatory and social art practices, which I studied with mounting scepticism. Although emerging tendencies like relational art and contextual art certainly contributed to the expansion of artistic practice, they also seemed structurally poised to fail at the real life they aspired to create through their performance of it (despite the truism that art as cultural practice is a form of life). It seemed to me that craft and these social art practices—arguably the descendants of the 1960s neo-avant-garde and counterculture—represented what were indeed mirror aspects of the same art-historical phenomenon, and that much was at stake in letting everyday making lie outside the aesthetic frameworks that operated in those discourses. This intuition, that existing discourses inhibit how we think about everyday making and doing, continues to fuel my interest and is the springboard for this current research project.

While ways of thinking about craft vary across discourses and historical periods, theoretical inquiries into the nature of making inevitably refer to classical philosophical concepts of *episteme* and *technē*, usually translated as knowledge and art or craft. These ancient terms were once used interchangeably, reflecting a more ambiguous and perhaps healthier relationship between theory and practice than is now generally assumed.² The word “craft” itself derives from the Old English *craeft* meaning strength and skill, and commonly refers to producing something well by hand, thus it retains the connotations of material-based knowledge evoked by *technē*. But something appears to have been lost in the translation across languages and times,

² Sandra Corse, *Craft Objects, Aesthetic Contexts: Kant, Heidegger, and Adorno on Craft* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009), 3.

for what now might be regarded as disparate practices in the arts and sciences—from weaving, pottery and music to medicine, farming and geometry—were, in ancient Greece, all examples of *technē*.³ Yet any attempt to rejuvenate craft vocabulary by looking to older models for insights into knowing through doing falls flat in the face of *technē*'s current iterations, in words like “technical” and “technique,” which have grown estranged from their etymological nuances. The ancient Greeks may be too different—too “other,” as poet and Classics scholar Anne Carson insists—for their everyday aesthetic practices to function in a contemporary context.⁴ Still, the enigma of these Greek terms points to an entwinement of idea and technique that is palpably absent in discourses that isolate conceptualization from execution, transcendence from transformation of materials, mind from matter, immaterial from material labour, idea from practice.

These dualisms, inherent in Western aesthetic discourse, mapped art and craft onto opposite ends of the creative spectrum and have long been contested issues in craft discourse. While the art/craft divide is no longer the focus of current established craft discourse, this division, or rather its underlying philosophical roots, still poses a significant obstacle to art history's explanatory powers with respect to craft and art practices engaged with the everyday. Dualisms simply do not capture enough. As the nineteenth-century inheritor of definitions of art established by eighteenth century aesthetic philosophy, art history has been drawn into a conceptual fragmentation of creative activities that were once intimately connected. By relegating art to a narrow, albeit powerful, sliver of human endeavour, art history has been prevented from adequately addressing the full range of diverse cultural production that falls

³ Corse, *Craft Objects, Aesthetic Contexts*, 4.

⁴ “Anne Carson on Writing from the Margins of Her Mind,” interview by Eleanor Wachtel, *Writers and Company*, CBC, May 8, 2016, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/writersandcompany/anne-carson-on-writing-from-the-margins-of-her-mind-1.3568450>.

within its increasingly widening scholarly purview. Craft history, in its turn, has been similarly confined by remaining conceptually tied to art.

Art history's incorporation of craft as the technical arm of the visual arts originates in its characterization as a class of media-specific disciplines—clay, glass, wood, metal and fibre—a system that has been described variously as a “consortium of genres” with “no intrinsic cohesion”⁵ and a modernist “material apartheid.”⁶ These five media formed the core of the post-war studio craft movement in North America and through mainstream venues such as fairs and markets, they and their associated objects came to stand for craft in the public and scholarly imaginations. Over time, the nascent movement forged its own critical voice and more stratified distribution channels, and its practitioners slowly began to gain visibility and recognition within the mainstream art world.

In tandem with this gradual integration of craft media into the contemporary artistic landscape from which it had once been largely excluded, there emerged more theoretically nuanced approaches to thinking about historical craft and making in general.⁷ Historian and curator Glenn Adamson has been at the forefront of a tide of scholarship in the past decade. In his first book, *Thinking Through Craft* (2007), he uses a set of concepts associated with craft—supplemental, material, skilled, pastoral, amateur—to explore its use as a rhetorical

⁵ Peter Greenhalgh, ed., *The Persistence of Craft: The Applied Arts Today* (London: A & C Black; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 1.

⁶ Garth Clark, “How Envy Killed the Crafts,” in *The Craft Reader*, ed. Glen Adamson (New York: Berg, 2010), 446.

⁷ Notable academic journals emerging in the past decade include the UK-based *Journal of Modern Craft*, which began publishing in 2008, and *Cahiers métiers d'art:::Craft Journal*, a bilingual Canadian publication launched in 2007. Other key texts that contribute to a craft “canon” were spurred by David Pye’s 1968 *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* and include Edward Lucie-Smith’s *The Story of Craft: The Craftsman's Role in Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1984), Peter Dormer’s *The Culture of Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), Howard Risatti’s *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), Richard Sennett’s *The Craftsman* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), Elissa Auther’s *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) and Marina Elena Buszek’s *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

device in contemporary art.⁸ His appraisal of the art-craft dialectic, along with Larry Shiner's *The Invention of Art*, ultimately reveals how craft's role as fine art's 'other' upholds and reinforces art's institutional structures and keeps craft in its corner.

The inherent trap in the craft-as-art strategy has indeed become a Gordian knot for craft practice and discourse. The broadening of the mainstream art world's territory has undoubtedly benefited craft-based artists; however, this absorption amounts to a reiteration of an existing hierarchical structure in which craft persists as a sub-discipline of art and art history. Even as the craft-as-art strategy of past decades was pursued as necessary and productive, its limitations were readily apparent. As far back as 1993, craft theorist Bruce Metcalf underlined the need to look beyond craft's place within art, lamenting the Kantian aesthetic legacy of 'pure' aesthetic experience, which "has surrendered art's—and craft's—purposes to remind people of their position in the cosmos; to point to meaning; to be used; to help; to heal; to entertain. It's high time craftsmen reclaim them."⁹

Adamson echoes Metcalf's dissatisfaction, describing the craft-as-art trope as a category error that undermines craft's radical non-art status and methodological potential for thinking about creative practice beyond art and aesthetics.¹⁰ Taking a material culture approach in his later book, Adamson again harnesses craft's cultural baggage, this time to examine its emergent oppositional identity in the industrial revolution, as industry's 'other'. The fact that his two monographs address craft from such different angles attests to its protean nature.¹¹ Yet despite advocating for craft's productive force (*qua* 'other'), both books examine craft along dialectical

⁸ The association of craft with skill has also been critically examined in Elaine Paterson and Susan Surette's edited volume *Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), which traces the phenomenon of sloppiness as a strategic response to contemporary artistic discourse around skilled making.

⁹ Bruce Metcalf, "Replacing the Myth of Modernism," *American Craft* 53 (February 1993): 47.

¹⁰ Glenn Adamson, ed., *The Craft Reader* (New York: Berg, 2010), 2.

¹¹ See Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) and *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

lines, and in so doing inadvertently reinforce craft as an oppositional concept even as they deconstruct its falsity. This critical stance ultimately begs the question of why craft need be conceived in opposition to anything at all.

Ceramist and historian Ezra Shales, on the other hand, gestures towards a post-oppositional stance for craft research by embracing the notion of craft's anonymity. In an inversion of the strategy of 1980s feminist scholars, who rescued domestic creative production from obscurity by documenting it as folk art, Shales studies the "extraordinary ordinary" objects produced in his local New England industrial environment, asking how we can chart anonymous making and ordinary manufacture.¹² In so doing, he challenges the dominance of the notion of artistic agency with the decidedly unromantic, craft-centric principle of anonymity.

Citing Duchamp's 1927 'readymade', *Fountain*, a ceramic urinal, as an emblematic case study of a then luxury hand-manufactured object whose social history art historians have ignored, Shales argues that academic commitment to a Duchampian paradigm does not serve craft because it creates a narrow bandwidth—called art—in which to understand creative production. Art's allegiance to this paradigm has restricted the scope of questions we can ask about objects and keeps us from creating a more expansive picture of creative practice; it also limits our ability to engage with important meta-aesthetic issues, such as how everyday working conditions affect well-being. As Shales states, "until art history addresses the material minutiae of commodity culture fully, it will always limp along as a weak and undisciplined discipline."¹³

The highly skilled craft practices that Shales witnesses in factories—what he calls a

¹²Ezra Shales, "The Fountain of Youth and the Empire of Modern Craftsmanship" (paper presented at *The Deskillling and Reskillling of Artistic Production* symposium, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, November 14, 2013). A notable example of feminist scholarship of this era is Mirra Bank's *Anonymous Was a Woman* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979).

¹³Ezra Shales, "Mass Production as an Academic Imaginary (or, if more *must* be said of Marcel, 'Evacuating Duchampian Conjecture in the Age of Recursive Scholarship')," *The Journal of Modern Craft* 6, no. 3 (2013): 273.

contemporary site of crafted objects—remind us that even as material knowledge erodes within the populace at large, things everywhere are still made, daily, by hand. By beginning with ordinary making, Shales proposes an expanded sense of what craft discourse could become.

Art and industry may be the two most dominant bandwidths in art historical accounts of craft within modernity, but they do hold many clues about the ordinary life left between the gaps. Adamson’s description of the effect of the Industrial Revolution’s control of skill is telling: he explains that the emergence of streamlined production methods put previously undifferentiated practices of everyday making on to diverging paths—one leading towards what he calls theatricality (referring to art and display), the other towards abstraction (referring to technological design and engineering).¹⁴ Indeed, his two monographs—one on art, the other on industry—could serve as bookends to illustrate this phenomenon.¹⁵

Bifurcation is evident in other attempts to broaden craft’s parameters while using the same tainted methodological tools. Inspired by art historian Rosalind Krauss’ structuralist analysis of 1970s sculptural practices, artist and educator Erik Scollon focuses on ceramic practice and attempts to map craft’s “expanded field,” replacing Krauss’ parameter-marking descriptors (architecture and landscape) with his own (functional and mimetic), a rubric which echoes Adamson’s own bifurcation descriptors.¹⁶ Glass artist and art historian Bruno Andrus attempts to conceptualize craft beyond its dichotomous relationship to art by appealing to a similar functional-symbolic continuum.¹⁷ While the impetus to reconceptualize craft is sound, and even urgent, the reworking of old frameworks by a new generation of artist-scholars is

¹⁴ Adamson, *The Invention of Craft*, 8.

¹⁵ Metcalf also observed this bifurcation and its effects in 1993, commenting that craft is sandwiched between design and fine art, and “losing territory from both sides.” See Metcalf, “Replacing the Myth of Modernism,” 40.

¹⁶ Erik Scollon, “Craft in the Expanded Field,” *Sightlines* (2008): 141.

¹⁷ Bruno Andrus, *Mutations: Les métiers d’art au Québec depuis 1930* (Montreal: Musée des maîtres et artisans du Québec, 2015), 35-36.

disconcerting, as the parameters of these continuums define the very dichotomies they wish to defeat, thus strengthening what anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls “the bars of our metaphysical cage.”¹⁸ Despite their intentions, both of these attempts to liberate making seem to rattle around in the same structuralist prison.

Craft has been called a “moving target” that eludes neat conceptualisation.¹⁹ Paul Mathieu observes that “it goes everywhere, but it is also nowhere; conceptually, it doesn’t fit easily within theory.”²⁰ Here Mathieu gets at the disjunction between the ubiquity of making and the specificity of craft’s cultural identity, even as the term is attributed to disparate phenomena. Despite (or because of) its artistic currency and evolving conceptualizations, craft may be, as Clark notes, “the most academically dependent activity in the arts.”²¹ One may even ask whether craft suffers from the same master-slave syndrome attributed to aesthetics within philosophy, attempting to legitimize and protect itself by restricting its purview, and hoping thereby to avoid interference. If this is the case, craft discourse may likewise be guilty of misunderstanding “its history, its object and its form” and thereby unwittingly undermining its own relevance.²²

The system of craft-specific institutions described by Clark and the emergence of increasingly pluralistic and craft-friendly institutional practices within contemporary art give only a partial picture of creative production. Indeed, they represent only slivers within a sliver of a much larger field of experience constituted by myriad practices for which craft is, in fact, the material and theoretical ground. To conceive of craft as the ground for all material practice may seem an obvious claim, insofar as aesthetic practices, including all forms of art and design, have

¹⁸ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Zeno and the Art of Anthropology: Of Lies, Beliefs, Paradoxes, and Other Truths,” *Common Knowledge* 17 (2011): 129.

¹⁹ Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (New York: Berg, 2007), 75.

²⁰ Paul Mathieu, “Towards a Unified Theory of Crafts: The Reconciliation of Differences,” in *Craft Perception and Practice: A Canadian Discourse, Volume 2*, ed. Paula Gustafson (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2005), 196.

²¹ Garth Clark, “How Envy Killed the Crafts,” in *The Craft Reader*, ed. Glenn Adamson (Oxford: Berg), 450.

²² Christopher Menke, “The Dialectic of Aesthetics: The New Strife between Philosophy and Art,” in *Aesthetic Experience*, eds. Richard Shusterman and Adele Tomlin (New York: Routledge, 2010), 59.

a material component (even conceptual practices are never completely dematerialized). But to conceive of craft as a ground implies another, more classically inflected sense of craft as *technē*, where craft is not conceptually bound to art or design or industry, to objecthood or even materiality.

Just as there is craftsmanship to parenting, medical care and urban design, as well as “sound engineering, speechmaking, [and] hosting a party,”²³ I similarly wish to evoke a sense of craft which permeates virtually all mundane activity, and which is present in those minute daily encounters of self and world that often escape scholarly attention. This sense of mundane doing and making applies equally to preparing a salad and tying one’s shoelace; to producing a product and producing an event, no matter how minor or ordinary. The sense of making I arrive at by the end of this paper refers to a heightened register, or instance, of doing, that is keyed to the play of sensory details always arising and subsiding between actors in a daily play—like the “grip on the pencil” or other tool— as well as encounters between objects themselves. From this perspective, where craft refers more generally to special instances of doing, it may be more appropriate to conceive of art as a subset of craft, rather than the other way around. Are there other frameworks, then, to understand what for lack of a better term is called craft, than in its guises within or between art and industry?

My thesis responds to this question by attending to the frequencies that lie outside craft’s default bandwidth and addressing the experiential aspect of making that has been absent in art historical narratives of craft informed by conventional (that is to say, post-Kantian) aesthetics. In this, my thought aligns with that of writers navigating craft’s laden history through “verbing” strategies that contextualize emergent performative and relational craft practices. This writing

²³ Shannon Stratton, “Exquisite Self-Reliance,” interview by Zachary Cahill, *The Exhibitionist*, August 10, 2015, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://the-exhibitionist.com/exquisite-self-reliance-zachary-cahill-talks-to-shannon-stratton/>.

takes many directions—from Lucy Lippard’s notion of dematerialization in relation to conceptual art practices to performance theory and a swath of older work that theorizes craft and art as process, including David Pye’s notion of workmanship of risk and Robert Morris’s process art writings—but as a whole it tends to emphasize what people *do*, rather than what they produce.²⁴ The “verbing” approach is also evident in curatorial and scholarly initiatives that de-emphasize craft’s objecthood and focus on the means of making and production processes behind the artwork.²⁵ Collectively, these lines of inquiry gesture towards the temporal, experiential nature of making—the doing—in order to illuminate a new understanding of artworks and art making. I similarly focus on the experience of making in the belief that it can lay the ground for an understanding of craft that eschews default artistic and industrial paradigms and returns to a less fragmented creative landscape.

My contribution to this effort entails examining how alternate, non-Kantian strands of aesthetic theory might enable art historical study of craft to encompass everyday experience—which is, I contend, craft’s defining condition, yet which remains largely undertheorized in critical craft discourse. Taking up philosopher Katya Mandoki’s call for an aesthetically grounded “prosaics” of the everyday, my thesis turns to philosophical frameworks for everyday experience that theoretically ground craft in its connection to prosaic acts of making—all the doing that lies outside art historical frameworks.²⁶

These frameworks overlap in their articulation of a “flat” view of existence, or a “flat ontology.” Flat ontologies question the subject-object distinction assumed by the Kantian

²⁴ Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973); Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); David Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968); Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

²⁵ Glenn Adamson and Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art in the Making: Artists and their Materials from the Studio to Crowdsourcing* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2016).

²⁶ Katya Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007).

aesthetic paradigm, and thus have important implications for an everyday aesthetics. Indeed, there is currently an explosion of Western philosophical interest in flat ontologies, now under the umbrella term “New Materialism” (also known as Object-Oriented Ontology or Speculative Realism). Such recent manifestations of flat ontologies arguably reiterate much older ontologies associated with Indigenous concepts of distributed subjectivity and agency, as well as revive elements of the American Pragmatist tradition of John Dewey and others.²⁷ All these philosophical frameworks reject the privileging of human over non-human and insist that all entities—human, animal, mineral, animate, inanimate—have the same ontological status. Some strains of New Materialism are associated with Manuel DeLanda and Rosi Braidotti, while others coalesce around the philosophies of Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman and Jane Bennett (to name but a few).²⁸ A buzzword and focus of interdisciplinary activity in humanities scholarship over the past decade, New Materialism and its cognate approaches have spawned new courses in humanities departments and art history conference sessions devoted to the topic.²⁹

²⁷ For example, see Steven Shaviro’s discussion of New Materialism’s debt to Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy in “The Actual Volcano: Whitehead, Harman, and the Problem of Relations,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Victoria, Australia: Re.press, 2011), 279.

²⁸ See Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London: Continuum, 2016); Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002) and *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2009); Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001); and Jane Bennett *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham : Duke University Press, 2010).

²⁹ Examples include “Objects, Objectives, Objections: The Goals and Limits of the New Materialisms in Art History,” session held at the 2014 Annual Conference of the College Art Association on February 13, 2014 in Chicago (<http://conference2014.collegeart.org/schedule/>); the 2014 “New Materialisms” conference and exhibition held at Sydney College of the Arts (<https://newmaterialismincontemporaryart.wordpress.com/new-materialisms-conference-sca/>); “Movement, Aesthetics, Ontology: IV Annual Conference on the New Materialisms,” held at the School of History, Culture and Arts Studies, University of Turku, Finland on May 16-17, 2013 (<https://movementaestheticsontology.wordpress.com/>); “Things: Their Lives, Agency, and Meanings,” sessions held at the 2014 UAAC-AAUC Conference in Toronto on October 24 and 25, 2014 (<http://www.uaac-aauc.com/sites/default/files/UAAC-AAUC%202014%20Conference%20Programme%20Congr%C3%A8s%20Nov%202021.pdf>); and McGill University Department of Art History Fall 2013 graduate seminar “ARTH 660: Contemporary Art & Criticism 1 – Perception as Something We Do III: New Materialist Approaches to Spectatorship in Contemporary Spatial Arts” (<https://www.mcgill.ca/ahcs/courses/past-courses/courses-2013-2014/graduate-ah>).

My thesis is a contribution to the emerging articulation of the relationship between such flat ontologies and aesthetics, and explores the ways in which flat ontologies challenge the metaphysics that underlie aesthetic theory as it has been handed down by Kant, that “recently unpopular philosopher.”³⁰ The implications of what I call *flat aesthetics*, or aesthetic systems that derive from flat ontologies, are significant for craft as a realm of everyday making. If taken seriously, flat ontologies have the potential to disrupt the structural assumptions that govern art and craft history, and can change how craft and other creative modes of engaging everyday experience—the “everything else” of my title—are conceptualized. I argue that we need a flattened aesthetics because even, and especially, as the methods of art and craft histories have broadened, their underlying ontological structure remains intact, trapped by the legacy of foundational premises that are inadequate to fully grasp the implications of practices the field must currently address—a case in point being the art-as-life practices of the avant-garde.

It has been said that art history’s methods, not its subject matter, unify the field.³¹ If everyday life has lain beyond the purview of art historical methods, one recourse is to turn to its theoretical foundations, thus shifting from a methodological problematic to a philosophical one. My goal is not to reposition craft within an expanded disciplinary field, but to understand how that field’s implicit epistemological and ontological propositions obscure the experiential nature of everyday making and doing as the ontologically prior ground, or metaphysical explanation, of all creative production.

I begin this project by addressing the idea of the everyday and its relation to the New Materialist take on subject-object relations. Turning to the “flat-ish” aesthetics of twentieth-

³⁰ István Danka, “Why Not Allies Rather than Enemies? Dewey and Rorty on Kant,” *Pragmatism Today* 1, no. 1 (Summer 2010):6, accessed March 15, 2017, http://www.pragmatismtoday.eu/summer2010/Danka-Dewey_and_Rorty_on_Kant.pdf.

³¹ James Elkins, ed., “Art History as a Global Discipline,” in *Is Art History Global?* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 15.

century American philosopher John Dewey, I consider alternatives to the disjunction between art and ordinary experience, and look for inspiration to scholars working with the same problematic in the context of Fluxus and neo-avant-garde practices. Dewey's 1934 *Art as Experience* provides a compelling conceptual framework to understand how aesthetic experience inheres in ordinary experience, thus linking it to the flat approaches of more recent New Materialist thinkers and rendering it particularly well suited to a holistic examination of craft as everyday material practice. This, in turn, is the subject of the final section in which we see most vividly the impact of a subject-object blur on the notion of making. The intersection of flat ontologies with aesthetics provides the locus for fully reconfiguring how we can think about the relationship between ordinary things and their makers.

1 – The Everyday and Flat Ontologies

The original meaning of “aesthetic” concerns the nature of experience as a whole and thus captures or includes the sense of ordinary, everyday experience—what theorist Ben Highmore calls “the great left-over.” Aesthetics, from the Greek *aesthētikos*, meaning perceptible things, was initiated as a branch of philosophy by Enlightenment philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, who originally conceived it as a “science of the senses,” a holistic inquiry into how things are known by means of the senses.³² However, following a trend of intellectual specialization, its meaning gradually shifted to designate a rarified realm of perception and cultural production that was the antithesis to the everyday.³³ By the time of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, the notion of aesthetic experience had become firmly distinguished from ordinary experience, and this distinction was faithfully preserved by the emergent

³² Paul Guyer, “18th Century German Aesthetics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), accessed March 15, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetics-18th-german/>.

³³ Ben Highmore, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday* (New York: Routledge, 2011), x.

discipline of art history. The development of institutional practices further confined the aesthetic realm to fine art—famously described by Dewey as the “beauty parlour of civilization”—as art displayed in museums or otherwise autonomous contexts became increasingly removed from the realm of everyday life, even as twentieth century avant- and neo-avant-garde practices countered this development in their pursuit of the ordinary.³⁴

By the latter decades of the twentieth century, however, a cultural discourse of the everyday emerged to challenge the exclusionary character of aesthetic theory. Developed by cultural studies theorists to analyze contemporary culture, the notion of The Everyday has been linked to the classical tradition of philosophical debates on “leading the good life,” but it has its own disciplinary blind spots. Like aesthetics, the everyday’s ethical nature is also a victim of intellectual specialization. Moreover, as Ben Highmore has pointed out, any form of abstraction or attempt to represent the everyday is problematic: whenever we distill the flow of life processes into patterns or extract elements from the continuum, we lose the everyday’s key quality, what he calls its “ceaseless-ness.” Everyday sensory life falls through the cracks of “atomised and hardened” enclaves of reflection (e.g. the disciplinary fields of psychology, sociology, economics and aesthetics), which leave the aural, olfactory and haptic realms—the “walking, talking, cooking, eating, slouching”—of ordinary life underdeveloped.³⁵ The same fragmentation arguably occurs in art history, which split creative production into categories that hinder our understanding of the original holistic sense of the aesthetic as attending to the imprecise world of ordinary sensory experience.

Philosophers have recently started pairing the two terms—aesthetics and the everyday—into a new concept. The “aesthetics of everyday life” is now a global scholarly trend within

³⁴ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 344.

³⁵ Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 25.

aesthetic circles, with its own acronym (AEL) and, ironically, the inevitable debates about its scope. However, while this emerging field should, in principle, broaden artistic discourse, it risks being misconstrued as a subset of aesthetics proper: we begin to speak of *an aesthetics of* everyday life, as if everyday life were a genre, like painting or sculpture or craft.³⁶ Philosopher Christian Hainic illustrates the impossibility of trying to rein in the everyday as an object of study by citing one author's futile attempt to limit everyday aesthetics to five areas: food, wardrobe, dwelling, conviviality, and going out.³⁷ He echoes Highmore in arguing that to contain and classify aesthetic experience within circumscribed realms is entirely to miss the point of the older, more holistic understanding of aesthetics.

The difficulty inherent in defining an everyday aesthetics (and hence delineating the field) centers on the theoretical distinction between ordinary—Highmore's "great left-over"—and extraordinary that is implicit in traditional post-Kantian aesthetics. Since aesthetics concerns the point of transcendence from ordinary to extraordinary (often by specialized or so-called divinely gifted artistic talent), an aesthetics of ordinary life appears to present a paradox at the heart of the art-life trope. If an everyday aesthetics pertains to a wider, taken-for-granted experiential realm, where is the threshold between art (extraordinary) and life (ordinary)? In other words, if everything is aesthetic, the notion loses its meaning; at the same time, if we do away with what is called the exceptionality condition, then everyday experience is itself diminished because we have no way to differentiate within it.³⁸ Alas, to ask the question is to reproduce the main assumption of traditional aesthetics and to reveal the inherent flaw of AEL

³⁶ As I hope is clear, the phrase "an aesthetics of" in the title of my thesis is not used to refer to a genre or subset.

³⁷ Christian Hainic, "On the Exceptional State of Aesthetic Objects in Everyday Aesthetics," *Journal for Communication and Culture* 4, no. 1 (September 2015): 91.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

by begging the question of whether there *is* a neat distinction between aesthetic and ordinary experience.

Drilling down into the conventional view of art as exceptional, we rapidly encounter notions of innovative conceptualization and skilled making—ideas that are bound to a principle of human agency whose substrate is subjectivity, two interrelated issues implicit in any discussion of art and aesthetics. Recently, however, the relations between subjectivity, agency and objects are being rethought, and the “specialness” once reserved to the capacity of human agents is being redistributed to everyday objects in turn. This is a current concern in recent anthropology, where the agency typically reserved to subjects is reconceived as a property of objects themselves. For example, Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory (ANT) counters human agency with the notion of “actants,” which includes both human and non-human action, and Alfred Gell attributes ‘secondary’ agency to art objects that extend their makers’ (or users’) agency.³⁹ Tellingly, Gell’s notion of art as a special form of technology, a “technology of enchantment,” preserves the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary, as does Ellen Dissanayake’s notion of art as “making special.”⁴⁰

Perhaps, then, a theoretical framework that accommodates ordinary making need not reject the extraordinary (or exceptional) as a condition of aesthetic experience, but reconcile it with the ordinary somehow—as the very notion of an agential object would entail. The de-privileging and redistribution of human agency to material objects is the starting point for an everyday aesthetics, for if all objects have agency, a recasting of the notion of the extraordinary

³⁹ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 17.

⁴⁰ See Alfred Gell, “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, eds. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 40-63; Ellen Dissanayake, “The Core of Art: Making Special,” in *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Came From and Why* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 39-63.

becomes possible. If this is so, then a prosaics of everyday making would do well to turn to flat aesthetics—where things and their makers, art and life, are reconciled in a profound way indeed.

The possibility of a flat aesthetics is currently the subject of significant discussion within an art world negotiating its relationship to theoretical currents in contemporary New Materialist thought.⁴¹ The flattened ontological frameworks associated with New Materialism challenge the subject-object split and core assumptions about metaphysical categories that stem from it—mind/matter, human/non-human, etc.—offering an alternative to the mind-matter divide that has plagued art and craft discourse in the Western tradition. The subject-object divide and its correlate, mind-matter duality, are fundamental problems of ontology (the study of being or existence) and epistemology (the study of knowledge), the two overlapping, so-called higher branches of classical philosophy. These in turn are distinct from the so-called lower branches of logic, aesthetics and ethics, normative disciplines traditionally concerned with truth, beauty and goodness, respectively, in the pursuit of “the good life.”⁴² However, the implications of flat aesthetics suggest that the assumptions of this very structure are now contested terrain, and that aesthetics may take a more foundational role in philosophy.

Just as an aesthetics of everyday life emerges dialectically through the Kantian separation of art from life, so too has contemporary philosophy been indelibly marked by Kant’s epistemological separation of the thinking subject from the world of material reality—the

⁴¹The term “New Materialism” has been used previously; see, for example, James Feibleman, *The New Materialism* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1970), a response to a perceived gap between philosophical approaches to materialism and scientific advances in quantum physics of the first half of the twentieth century, as well as an early paper entitled “The New Materialism” by James Bissett Pratt, published in *The Journal of Philosophy* 19, no. 13 (1922): 337-351. This is also not the first time philosophers prioritize ontological questions. The twenty-first-century New Materialist movement in humanities scholarship emerges from twentieth-century Euro-Western philosophers concerned with blurring the ontological distinction between subject and object, a tradition that extends back to philosophers Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others. Flat ontologies have also been connected to medieval thought systems and Christian mysticism; see Andrew Cole, “The Call of Things: A Critique of Object-Oriented Ontology,” *Minnesota Review* 80 (2013): 106-118.

⁴²Ruth Saw and Harold Osborne, “Aesthetics as a Branch of Philosophy,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 1 (January 1960): 8.

noumenal world, which, since Kant, has been irrevocably situated beyond the phenomenal veil of human cognition. New Materialist philosopher Quentin Meillassoux has coined the term “correlationism” to characterize the so-called external world problem emerging from the widespread post-Kantian belief that “being cannot be thought apart from a subject.”⁴³ By metaphysically dividing the world into mind, or thought, and matter, we confine philosophy to human-world relations and epistemological questions about how we can know and represent it, including Kant’s epistemological vision of aesthetic judgment by a “disinterested” thinking subject. In this way, Meillassoux argues, correlationist anthropocentrism robs us of the “great outdoors.” As philosopher Graham Harman explains, New Materialist thought reconfigures the epistemological basis for aesthetics by shifting the focus to “the outdoors,” positing a new ontology of mind-independent reality that speculates on non-human relationships.

For this reason, New Materialism has been called the “theory of everything.”⁴⁴ Instead of privileging the subject, it puts all things, regardless of scale, on a flattened ontological plane—a random list from Harman includes neutrinos stars, palm trees, rivers, cats, armies, nationals, superheroes, unicorns, and square circles⁴⁵—so all things equally exist (although, as Ian Bogost so astutely qualifies, they do not exist equally).⁴⁶ Humans are no longer the sole agential things amongst inert matter. Rather they are simply one kind of object among many: the subject counts as just another object, or, as anthropologist Tim Ingold puts it, “*people are things too.*”⁴⁷ Indeed, what are known as subject and object are rather *aesthetic properties* shared between objects, and

⁴³ Levi Bryant, “Correlationism,” in *Meillassoux Dictionary*, eds. Peter Gratton and Paul J. Ennis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 46-48.

⁴⁴ See Timothy Morton, “Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology,” *Qui Parle* 19 (Spring/Summer 2011): 6.

⁴⁵ Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2009), 188-89.

⁴⁶ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 11.

⁴⁷ Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), 94. Italics in the original.

the seemingly special human cognitive faculty of perception becomes just an aesthetic property, one way among many that certain objects relate. Harman illustrates this principle, explaining that in an object-oriented ontology, fire burning cotton is only different *by degree* from human perceiving of cotton.⁴⁸ They are simply different kinds of relations between objects, and each kind of object relates to another in its own way; thus, fire does not relate to cotton's whiteness, only its flammability.

New Materialism, by asking us to understand an object on its own terms, invites us to shift our attention from our relation to objects to what he calls “the relation between raindrops and the wood itself,” to the world that is happening beyond us as the protagonist of the story. In other words, the New Materialist proposition invites us to ask of things, as Bogost does: what is their proper phenomenology?⁴⁹ It demands speculation not about how we experience objects or how they appear to us, but how things experience themselves, each other and—yes—even us. This question does not attribute to all objects the capacity to feel and think (as one critic of Latour's ANT notes, “scallop don't negotiate, represent or betray. Motors don't become interested in projects or allow or forbid anything”)⁵⁰ but rather the possibility that they do in some sense encounter, or confront, one another.

A flat ontological model thus creates a picture of a relational world of agentic forces in which subjects and objects meld. This decisive break from anthropocentrism has important implications for how we see all things, from climate change to technology to art and craft. More specifically here, it makes possible new ways to theorize making in the everyday and how we experience what has been called the “dance of agency,” that is, our everyday sensory encounter

⁴⁸ Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, “Toward a Speculative Philosophy,” introduction to *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2011), 8.

⁴⁹ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 10.

⁵⁰ Dave Elder-Vass, “Searching for Realism, Structure and Agency in Actor Network Theory,” *British Journal of Sociology* 59, no. 3 (2008): 469.

with things in the world as we make and do.⁵¹ Flat ontologies circumvent the mind-matter rupture associated with the subject-object split, creating a continuum that distributes agency to matter as equal partners in a play in which all have a part but no one has the central role. This central insight of flat ontologies allows a philosophical understanding of making as an interactive relation of subjects and objects, one with an implicit ethical dimension, and creates a model for art historical understanding of materials as agential in everyday processes.

Yet New Materialism's flat ontology brings with it significant challenges. With the subject completely evacuated and an account of the phenomenology proper to objects still elusive, it is a challenge for humanities scholars to instrumentalize these New Materialist insights. Indeed, some remain sceptical of the entire project of New Materialism, since it fails ultimately to resolve the correlationist dilemma of residual subjectivity, beyond which reality might truly be said to appear to itself. As anthropologist Daniel Miller notes, the resolution of mind and materiality is always circular.⁵² Moreover, as of this writing, there is no single-author work dedicated to New Materialist aesthetics, although a number of New Materialist anthologies focusing on art have recently been published.

While the aesthetic discourse of New Materialism remains in development, however, the specific implications of a flattened ontological framework on an analysis of aesthetic practice have already been foregrounded in an earlier philosophical tradition. The pragmatism of John Dewey predates New Materialism by several decades and is the flattest theory of its kind in the Euro-Western tradition of that period. Dewey's thought, moreover, is beginning to have a much-delayed impact within art history.

⁵¹ Andrew Pickering, "Material Culture and the Dance of Agency," in *Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, edited by Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 191.

⁵² Daniel Miller, introduction to *Materiality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 14.

2 – Dewey’s Flat(ish) Aesthetics

The inexhaustible flux and flow of everyday life forms the backdrop for Dewey’s aesthetic theory elaborated in *Art as Experience*. As its title clearly suggests, the book asserts the claim of art as experience and promises to deliver an exactingly detailed inquiry into the nature of aesthetic experience in relation to ordinary experience. From the first page, where he declares that the task of aesthetic theory is to “restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience,” his vision of the nature and function of aesthetic theory departs dramatically from the Kantian paradigm.⁵³

Dewey states that “art is a *quality* that permeates an experience; it is not, save by a figure of speech, the experience itself.”⁵⁴ In other words, while *experience* describes a continuous interaction of what he calls the “live creature and environing conditions,” *aesthetic* describes the quality of that engagement. He explains that the aesthetic is found in the ordinary, raw events of everyday life that we sensually absorb (“the fire-engine rushing by”), and that

the sources of art in human experience will be learned by him [*sic*] who sees how the tense grace of the ball-player infects the onlooking crowd; who notes the delight of the housewife tending the patch of green in front of the house; the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals.⁵⁵

When I first read these insights in the opening pages and indeed throughout Dewey’s book, they struck me as the philosophy that everyday practices of craft and the avant-garde have been waiting for. Dewey’s gambit is to account for the extraordinary within the context of the ordinary and without the reifying frame of art as signifier for that extraordinary. His approach is particularly remarkable considering the contrasting orientations of his contemporaries, the

⁵³ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 326. Italics mine.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

formalist art critics Roger Fry and Clive Bell, whose operational assumptions derived from the Kantian idea of “significant form” as art’s necessary and sufficient condition of difference.⁵⁶

In a clear rebuttal of Kant, Dewey insists that the aesthetic is not a transcendent “intruder in experience from without,” but rather is no more, and no less, than the “clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience.”⁵⁷ The aesthetic quality of an experience is what “rounds [it] out” into completeness, and indeed no experience has unity unless it has aesthetic quality.⁵⁸ He describes this unity as *an* experience that is demarcated from the general stream of experience—as in “*that* meal, *that* storm, *that* rupture of friendship”—while remaining continuous with “that uninterrupted flow.”⁵⁹ Dewey calls this promise of the aesthetic in all experience “art in germ,” a metaphor that is echoed by Marxist theorist Henri Lefebvre, who refers to art as “play-generating yeast”⁶⁰ in the everyday, and Highmore, who refers to aesthetic theory’s concern with “the grain of experience.”⁶¹

In contrast to Kant, whom Dewey describes as a master in “first drawing distinctions and then erecting them into compartmental divisions,” Dewey argues that the subject-object split underlying traditional aesthetic theory is the “most fatal to aesthetic understanding.”⁶² He explains that this ontological dualism has been the fatal flaw of philosophers of art precisely because the *lack* of distinction between self and world is what counts as aesthetic experience. For, as Dewey states, “the uniquely distinguishing feature of aesthetic experience is exactly the fact that no such distinction of self and object exists in it, since it is aesthetic in the degree in

⁵⁶ Jerrold Levinson, ed., “Philosophical Aesthetics: An Overview,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.

⁵⁷ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 43-46.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 41. By this, Dewey does not imply that aesthetic experience is always “good,” only that it is always integral and singular. See Richard Shusterman and Adele Tomlin’s introduction to *Aesthetic Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 8.

⁵⁹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 37, 19.

⁶⁰ Stephen Johnstone, introduction to *The Everyday* (London: Whitechapel, 2008), 14.

⁶¹ Highmore, *Ordinary Lives*, 37.

⁶² Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 252.

which organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears.”⁶³

Dewey introduces the notion of peak, or consummatory, experience, noting that “the backbone and indeed the life-blood of my aesthetic theory [...] is that *every* normally complete experience, every one that runs its own full course, is aesthetic in its consummatory phase.”⁶⁴ He explains that an experience at its height “signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events.”⁶⁵ Rather than an ontological framework in which subject-object relations are predicated upon a knowing subject acting on inert objects, he posits a New Materialist-style provisional subject integrated in a landscape of reciprocal energies. The structure of an experience entails the dual events of what he calls “doing,” or acting, and the more receptive process of “undergoing,” or being acted upon, even against our will. Dewey illustrates the process of acting and being acted upon with his own prosaic example of a person lifting a stone who in turn “undergoes, suffers, something,” namely:

the weight, strain, texture of the surface of the thing lifted. The properties thus undergone determine further doing. The stone is too heavy or too angular, not solid enough; or else the properties undergone show it is fit for the use for which it is intended. The process continues until a mutual adaptation of the self and the object emerges and that particular experience comes to a close. What is true of this simple instance is true, as to form, of every experience.⁶⁶

This basic principle of reciprocity is absent in conventional narratives of creative practice and a powerful concept for any consideration of ordinary doing and making because it emphasizes the object half of the equation in subject-object interactions.

⁶³ Ibid., 249.

⁶⁴ John Dewey, “Aesthetic Experience as a Primary Phase and as an Artistic Development,” *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism* 9, no. 1 (1950): 56.

⁶⁵ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 19.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 44.

Dewey evokes the vivid metaphor of a mountain range to illustrate how peak experience is both continuous with and an intensification of ordinary experience, observing that “mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They are the earth in one of its manifest operations.”⁶⁷ This imagery can be further abstracted into an aerial view, where a sort of Deweyan topographic map emerges, with peaks represented as a series of concentric irregular circles. This graphic model can effectively map aesthetic practices in an art-life continuum as a flat ontological field of experience. The map as a whole can be taken to represent the entire field of creative production. Everyday aesthetic practice—the “everything else” of my title—appears as a continuous, interconnected system together with more specialized practices. Dewey’s ordinary “doings and undergoings” inhabit the entire circle up to its periphery, while the more extraordinary goings on of the art world—a kind of making we might call in Deweyan terms “peak doing”—inhabit the central, denser part of the system.

The mountain range imagery is significant because while the ontological terrain is not entirely flat, it is contiguous: flattish. Dewey argues for continuity, insisting that the burden of proof rests upon the claim of opposition and dualism, even while acknowledging, in an amusing caveat, circumstances requiring a hierarchical ontological worldview: “a person can hardly cross a street where traffic is swift and crowded save as he keeps in mind differences which philosophers formulate in terms of ‘subject’ and ‘object’.”⁶⁸ His aesthetic model leaves room for subjectivity, conventionally a prerequisite for any account of experience, even while it exerts a flattening force on the ontological field. Effectively straddling the two positions, it offers a middle path that may be intuitively easier to grasp. His nuanced understanding of the self

⁶⁷ Ibid., 269.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 248.

distinguishes his aesthetic framework from, on the one hand, the neat subject-object split implicit in Enlightenment aesthetics and, on the other, the super-flat ontologies of New Materialism.

Given the difficulty that New Materialist philosophers have had manoeuvring a terrain completely devoid of subjectivity, perhaps Dewey's flattish ontology is flat enough. Moreover, his aesthetic model has a happy have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too effect, accounting for the extraordinary as a density or saturation of energies within a continuum of the ordinary. Art's difference from ordinary experience is thus *only one of degree*, to borrow Harman's phrase. In this way, by eschewing the built-in Kantianism implied by traditional aesthetics, he articulates a philosophical foundation for an everyday aesthetics that dualistic ontologies fall short of capturing.

3 – Dewey and the Art History of the Everyday

Today the melding of art and life is not a hair-raising proposition. After a century of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements seeking to integrate art and the praxis of life, Dewey's principle of continuity seems almost self-evident. Yet his work did not have the impact on philosophy or art history that it might have had: Dewey fell out of favour with philosophers by the mid-twentieth century; mainstream art historians, for their part, have ignored him almost entirely.⁶⁹ Perhaps their very premises were an obstacle to recognizing the potential of Dewey's theory, since as a whole, art historical methodologies are largely predicated on a subject-object distinction.⁷⁰ However, Dewey has gained increasing attention among scholars addressing

⁶⁹ That Dewey's theory was not readily adopted by art historians in the twentieth century is worthy of a dissertation on its own. In the discipline of philosophy, his work began to be revived in the 1970s, notably, and at times controversially, by philosopher Richard Rorty. See Richard Shusterman, "Pragmatism and Liberalism between Dewey and Rorty," *Political Theory* 22, no. 3 (1994): 391.

⁷⁰ Art historians did adopt phenomenology, a philosophical account of bodily experience, as a method to understand how a viewer's bodily encounter of an artwork creates meaning. However, while phenomenology considers subjectivity inseparable from the body and the world, it largely maintains the subject's privileged status, thus its subject-object breakdown is only partial.

marginalized practices such as decorative art, everyday aesthetics (notably Ben Highmore) and other non-canonical aesthetic practices, although unfortunately not from craft scholars by any measure.

Hannah Higgins is an exemplary case of an art historian who encounters the limitations of available art historical methods for understanding aesthetic experience and finds a solution in Dewey's flattish ontologies. Not coincidentally, she turns to Dewey in attempting to write about exactly the same kind of everyday experience that this thesis is concerned with—not in relation to craft, but rather to Fluxus. While historically, craft and Fluxus have exhibited vastly different relations to art—one cordoned off from the art world, the other shackled to it—the inversely marginalized stance of these two forms of production points up art history's discursive limits and how those limits might now be reconceptualized through flat ontologies to accommodate an aesthetics of the ordinary.

Of the twentieth century's avant-garde movements that sought to perform or capture the everyday, Fluxus arguably comes closest. As a whole, the avant-garde is understood as a turn against the concept of autonomy in art.⁷¹ Fluxus' strategy specifically focused on working against the exceptionality condition by presenting ordinary life as art—as, for example, in George Brecht's event scores, which framed everyday actions as minimalist performances, or Alison Knowles' iconic participatory performance piece *Make a Salad*, which involves publicly making and serving salad (for up to 1000 people).⁷² Their utopian non-art goal—described in Allan Kaprow's manifesto as “once, the task of the artist was to make good art; now it is to avoid

⁷¹ Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 22.

⁷² Alison Knowles, “Make a Salad,” performance at Tate Modern gallery, posted June 20, 2008, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/performance-make-salad>.

making art of any kind”⁷³—recalls the we-have-no-art trope, attributed to Indigenous cultures by anthropologists, which gained currency within 1970s counterculture discourse.⁷⁴

Fluxus scholar Mike Kelley observed the inherent contradiction in non-art, whereby artists must straddle “the avoidance of art and the impossibility of avoiding non-art.”⁷⁵ Considered from the vantage point of traditional art history, their goal to draw attention to the aesthetic value of ordinary experience was doomed to failure due to an intrinsic structural flaw: Fluxus artists cannot *not* make art. In other words, the reason Fluxus artists failed to unify art and life was, paradoxically, their identity as artists. Thus, a Fluxus event becomes, as philosopher Yuriko Saito points out, “a work of art, though it is just like, or a slice of, everyday life.”⁷⁶ Their inevitable dialectic relationship to art and its unavoidable framing effect diminished the everydayness they sought: the moment we try to capture it, the very ordinariness of the everyday is lost.

If for Fluxus artists the everyday was unattainable, for art historians it was simply invisible. A case in point is *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977*, which examines why countercultural practices have been left out of modernist art historical narratives. In their introductory essay, the editors argue that counterculture practices were unidentifiable to traditional art practitioners and art historians: they so radically changed the “essential conditions of art” that there was often no way to discern between “the practice of

⁷³ Allan Kaprow, “Manifesto (1966),” in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 81.

⁷⁴ The notion of “no word for art” was challenged as one of the “top three Indian art clichés” by art historian Diane Mithlo, who argues against the meme as a “simplistic artistic trope” that blurs the presence of the artist. See also Sherry Farrell Racette, “I Want to Call Their Names in Resistance”: Writing Aboriginal Women into Canadian Art History, 1880–1970,” in *Rethinking Professionalism: Women and Art in Canada, 1850-1970*, eds. Kristina Huneault and Janice Anderson (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), 289.

⁷⁵ Jeff Kelley, introduction to *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, xxi.

⁷⁶ Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 39. It must be stated that Fluxus artists sought this paradox as the only way to “charge the everyday with metaphoric power”; indeed, states Allan Kaprow, anything less paradoxical would be “simplistic.” See Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, 222.

art and the conduct of lifestyle.” Significantly, an entire section of the book contains essays that focus on the importance in the counterculture of craft and making things by hand. In a manner that is reminiscent of the we-have-no-art trope, they observe that the art of the counterculture was invisible or uncategorizable, “not because art was a minor part, but because the entire movement can be seen as a kind of art.”⁷⁷ The counterculture is “too much like life” to be contained within an art historical framework, so the authors tried in effect to develop an art historical category for the gap between art and life, rendering it visible by writing a history of “art on the border of non-art.”⁷⁸

Higgins offers a way out of this impasse. Using the insights of Dewey’s aesthetic theory, she explores how a flat ontological framework bypasses the art-historical framing dilemma that derives from subjectivity in order to understand Fluxus’ experiential nature. In her book *Fluxus Experience*, Higgins tries to create a discursive context for Fluxus, steering a path between representation and the granular, non-represented “black-hole” of everyday experience.⁷⁹ She understands Fluxus as an experiential exploration of the everyday—and she has authority to make the claim: the daughter of two prominent Fluxus artists, Higgins grew up experiencing art as part of everyday life.

Rejecting art history as an interpretive structure for what has been called the “utter chaos known as Fluxus,” Higgins departs from the art historicization that has, as she argues, distorted “a loose alliance of people who did not even want to be identified with art” into a centrally organized avant-garde movement.⁸⁰ Drawing inspiration from Dewey’s insight that aesthetic experience happens when subject and object blur, Higgins flexes Dewey’s philosophical

⁷⁷ Auther and Lerner, *West of Center*, xxiii. Auther and Lerner make a distinction between what they refer to as the “broader project of the counterculture” and the “narrow aspirations of the avant-garde.”

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, xxv.

⁷⁹ Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 61.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

language to describe Fluxus as a “transactional, interpenetrative framework that creates a sense of continuity with the world” and dissolves the epistemological boundaries between subject and object. Dewey provides her the theoretical ground to bring Fluxus into philosophical territory, as a flat ontological structure that situates people within their sensory worlds. The vocabulary she uses to describe Fluxus events as a “non-hierarchical density of experience” echoes Dewey’s own characterization of aesthetic experience as an intensification of ordinary experience.⁸¹

Higgins describes Fluxus as a constellation of people with “something unnameable in common,” reflecting her desire to keep Fluxus conceptually open and fluid, and thus avoid its being art historically “explained away.”⁸² The beauty of the term “Fluxus” was that it had at least no connotative value to undermine its speculative potential, unlike craft’s confinement within an art paradigm (which is itself both inflated and confined). This difficulty of language and its restrictions is reflected in Dewey’s catachrestic use of words. One prominent Dewey scholar preemptively led his presentations with the caveat that “by experience Dewey doesn’t mean experience, by nature Dewey doesn’t mean nature, by mind Dewey doesn’t mean mind,” and so on.⁸³ Doing and making point to phenomena so vast that, like experience, they gesture toward “precisely that which exceeds concepts and even language itself.”⁸⁴ Craft is like any other word, Greenhalgh notes, in that it “has no sacred right to exist” and he speculates that the word may fade in the coming decades.⁸⁵ However, until a making discourse is fully developed, perhaps with its own speculative term, the term “craft” will similarly need to be used catachrestically, as I do in this thesis, to refer to ideas for which there is no current suitable vocabulary.

⁸¹ Ibid., 12.

⁸² Ibid., 83.

⁸³ Steven Fesmire, *Dewey* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 81.

⁸⁴ Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 5.

⁸⁵ Greenhalgh, *The Persistence of Craft*, 16.

Higgins' use of Dewey's flattish aesthetics suggests fertile possibilities for discussions of craft as well. Her strategy of retroactively fitting his theory into an art historical lacuna for avant-garde practice can be similarly adapted to thinking about making beyond the meanings attributed to craft within aesthetic and technological discourses. Yet surprisingly, craft scholars have paid little attention to Dewey thus far. Indeed, I find it curious that craft historians have not adopted Dewey as their patron saint, as his theory of experience is ideally suited to a comprehensive understanding of making, beyond its reification as performance in contemporary relational craft and social art practices.⁸⁶ Interestingly, Dewey did not use examples from the avant-garde of his time to illustrate his theory, though it would have been the perfect case study to critique the institutional conditions that produced the "museum conception of art" which he so disdained.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, he has been considered a philosophical precursor of the neo-avant-garde and can be similarly regarded as a philosopher of craft and ephemeral practices who was ahead of his time.

Following Higgins' example with Fluxus, making can similarly be understood as a constellation of acts with something unnameable in common, marked by a quality of experience that might be described by Dewey and Higgins as "dense." This unnameable, unframeable sense of making as a density manifest in the amorphous flux of ordinary experience—what Dewey calls "interacting energies within a living continuum"⁸⁸—presents a vastly more diffuse

⁸⁶ Theorist Hal Foster argues that in fact the rubric "social practice art" emphasizes rather than dissolves art-life boundaries, because "rather than hold the two terms together, such rubrics tend to release a given practice from the criteria of either social effectivity or artistic invention; the one tends to become the alibi for the other, with any pressure from the one side dismissed as sociological and any from the other as aestheticist—and so the announced resolution breaks down again." See Hal Foster, "Post-Critical," *October* 139 (Winter 2012): 8.

⁸⁷ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 6. It has been argued that Dewey's close collaboration and use of the art collection of his benefactor Alfred Barnes may also have been a factor. See Kevin Decker, "Refiguring Art and Craft in Dewey: Aesthetics as if Practice Mattered" (conference presentation, Annual Meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, Eastern Washington University, March 5, 2016). Available online: http://www.american-philosophy.org/saap2016/openconf/modules/request.php?module=oc_program&action=summary.php&id=8.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

conception than its art historically constrained designation suggests and which craft theorists have long resisted. Philosopher Kevin Decker concurs, arguing that art should be considered as “but one part of the manifold that is ‘craft as experience’.”⁸⁹ Indeed Dewey’s flattish aesthetics might well have been entitled *Craft as Experience*. His holistic account of aesthetics as a mode of the everyday provides the philosophical premise for the art-life blur that Fluxus sought and craft already manifests. In the last section of this thesis, I explore how flat ontologies provide the theoretical ground for craft in this expanded field of everyday making.

4 – Everyday Doing and Making

If ideas, like theories, are structures that attempt to rein in a disparate range of phenomena, then making is a very big idea indeed.⁹⁰ Making, a sprawling and ubiquitous word, lacks craft’s disciplinary history and identity as an artistic category and has been adopted only recently as a collective term in academic settings.⁹¹ *To make*, and its subjective case, *maker*, have become culturally loaded terms referring to a self-aware DIY approach to culture that grasps amateur crafting as an “attitude to everyday life,” a sort of present-day counterpart to the practices of the 1960s counterculture.⁹² Despite its current specificity as a cultural meme, making as a phenomenon alludes to a way of doing, knowing and being—that is, onto-epistemologically—in the foundational sense addressed in this chapter.

In common English usage, the verbs *to make* and *to do* refer to a vast array of experience that in fact is expressed in many other European languages by a single word (*faire, machen, hacer, fazer, fare, dělat*, etc.). Although idiomatic expressions using these two verbs abound, *to*

⁸⁹ Decker, “Refiguring Art and Craft in Dewey,” 15.

⁹⁰ Eric Fernie, *Art History and its Methods: A Critical Anthology* (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 366.

⁹¹ Marte S. Gulliksen and Siri Homlong, “Making, Materiality and Knowledge,” *Form Akademisk* 6, no. 2 (2013), accessed March 15, 2017, <https://journals.hioa.no/index.php/formakademisk/article/view/649>.

⁹² Amateur craft is also getting its share of academic attention. See Stephen D. Knott, *Amateur Craft: History and Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) and the November 2012 edition of *The Journal of Modern Craft* (vol. 5, no. 3).

make, especially its subset, *to craft*, refers to a more specific set of experiences than *to do*.

Literary theorist Terry Eagleton, in reminding us that aesthetics originated as a “discourse of the body,” points to the nature of aesthetic production implied by craft.⁹³ In contrast to doing, or even to making (as in idiomatic expressions like make a scene, make a point, make friends, make sense), craft generally implies the experience of a body immersed in a process of transformative material encounter, involving a maker in a creative act of intention and physical engagement.

The epistemological tropes current in craft discourse, however—such as *making as knowing* or *thinking through making*—generally model a quite different perspective. The idea of the body as a putative “extension of the brain,” for example, forms the subtext of Pamela Smith’s *Ways of Making and Knowing: The Material Culture of Empirical Knowledge*, which examines the notion that making constitutes knowing. The author discusses how knowledge emerged from skilled craft and aesthetic practices in medieval and early modern Europe and how embodied encounters with natural materials were a way of knowing nature in a general sense, anticipating modern science.⁹⁴ Smith developed the notion of “artisanal epistemology” to refer to the bodily form of knowledge gained by attentive encounter with materials.⁹⁵

This important concept is echoed by Adamson’s idea of “material intelligence.” Indeed, the claim that making is a way to know the world is a familiar and even obvious conceit to makers of things. Craft scholars have long posited “hand-knowledge” as a challenge to the presumed epistemological division between making and knowing; they have likewise posited craft skill as a form of knowledge and making as its own kind of thinking.⁹⁶

⁹³ Terry Eagleton, “The Ideology of the Aesthetic,” *Poetics Today* 9, no. 2 (1988): 327.

⁹⁴ Pamela Smith, Amy Meyers, Harold J. Cook, introduction to *Ways of Making and Knowing: The Material Culture of Empirical Knowledge* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 18.

⁹⁵ Pamela Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 155.

⁹⁶ Beyond material practices, performance theorist Laura Cull also argues for a dilation of what counts as thinking to include bodily experiences and processes of all kinds. See Laura Cull, “Performance as Philosophy: Responding to

These propositions have been an important focus in recent craft scholarship, and yet the making-as-thinking trope is also, to a certain degree, a trap. Craft's making-as-knowing argument brings nuance and renewed value to an understanding of craft processes, but it also carries a slight aspirational whiff of 'me too!' reminiscent of modern craft's adoption of a fine art paradigm to raise its artistic status. The claim that making is knowing, while ostensibly validating making as a cognitive mode, excludes the possibility that making is not only knowing, just as knowing is not only thinking.

A parallel example might be helpful here. In his essay "The Anthropology of Ontologies," anthropologist Eduardo Kohn examines how assertions about belief systems mark *belief* as the epistemological status of the claim. For example, the assertion that an Amazonian tribe *believes* that animals are persons negates its metaphysical assumption of (a very different) reality and instead absorbs it into Western metaphysical assumptions of Amazonian realities as "mere" beliefs or socially constructed representations.⁹⁷ This example serves to allegorically demonstrate a parallel problem with aesthetic frameworks: the assertion that making is knowing absorbs making into the metaphysical assumption of a mind-matter divide that marks the epistemological status of the claim; that is, making-as-knowing reveals the prior limits or conditions of making as epistemological, and has the effect of obscuring making's ontological nature. Within this epistemological framework, making cannot be conceived as anything other than a kind of craft skill (just as the craft-as-art trope bars craft from being anything other than art or not-art). So while on the surface, the claim that making is knowing seems to dispute the mind-matter divide and elevate making to the plane of cognition, its cognitive/epistemological

the Problem of 'Application'," *Theatre Research International* 37, no. 1 (2012): 20. Many contemporary philosophers have similarly highlighted the role of the body in cognitive experience. Neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman's notion of somaesthetics is a notable example; see *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁹⁷ Eduardo Kohn, "Anthropology of Ontologies," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (2015): 319.

presupposition belies and reaffirms the very divide in the philosophical system that creates the problem it tries to undo. It is, in New Materialist parlance, “correlationist” in its dependence on knowledge as subjective experience of a separate world.

In the agential landscape of flat ontologies, however, knowing is not an exclusively human practice.⁹⁸ Rather, maker and material are equal partners. And perhaps, too, making is more than just knowing; perhaps it is akin to what philosopher Étienne Souriau has called an “onto-epistemological unravelling”—that is, equally of knowing *and* being.⁹⁹ Adamson echoes Souriau’s description of the creative act, referring to three ways of being with things: “making, living and knowing.”¹⁰⁰ Dewey is surely referring likewise to these dynamic processes of entwining, conversing agential actors when he states that an object of perception “exists in exactly the same interaction with a living creature that constitutes the activity of perceiving.”¹⁰¹ Making, by extension, is thus not just a creative but rather a co-creative experience.

According to philosopher Giorgio Agamben, the aesthetic assumption of human creative will has so thoroughly penetrated our conception of art that “even the most radical critiques of aesthetics have not questioned its founding principle.”¹⁰² Flat aesthetic frameworks go some distance in doing so. By contrast, they assume creativity to include non-human processes, as evinced in Dewey’s notion of the transactional body and his couplet of terms *doing* and *undergoing* to evoke reciprocity and distributed agency. This view is evident in the writings of authors across disciplines concerned with aesthetic production as a whole, whose shared

⁹⁸ Karen Barad makes this point in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 185.

⁹⁹ Iris van der Tuin, “On the Mode of Invention of Creative Research: Onto-Epistemology,” in *Material Inventions: Applying Creative Research*, eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (New York: IB Tauris, 2014), 260.

¹⁰⁰ See Adamson’s New School Spring 2017 “Material Intelligence” course description at <https://courses.newschool.edu/courses/PGHT5785>. Accessed February 28, 2017.

¹⁰¹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 177.

¹⁰² Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1999), 72.

insistence on object agency reconceptualizes the experience of making as other than an intelligent bodily engagement with materials. Design theorist Terence Rosenberg, for example, takes this tack when he describes making and the body as mutually constitutive: making creates a surrogate that extends into a world of intermingled human and non-human bodies.¹⁰³

Anthropologist Tim Ingold counters contemporary discussions of art, craft or technology that continue to presume making as the imposition of form onto materials “by an agent with a design in mind.” Instead, he argues for a rather Deweyan notion of creativity, where form emerges within a network of “forces and flows of material,” and where to describe the properties of materials “is to tell the stories of what happens to them as they flow, mix and mutate.” And it comes as no surprise that an anthropologist’s flat ontological picture of reality should reflect the philosopher’s vision, for Ingold himself defines the discipline of anthropology as “philosophy with the people in.”¹⁰⁴

Makers, for their part, have long known that making is a dialogue between maker and material, a network of experiential relationships. Artists are said to wrestle with, and sometimes surrender to, materials as agentic partners (or foes) in the studio. Theorists also refer to a Deweyan subject-object blur and the performativity of materials. Adamson calls craft a triangulation between maker, tool and material, invoking phenomenologist Martin Heidegger.¹⁰⁵

Pamela Smith’s medieval artisan evokes the natural world’s agentic power and even early

¹⁰³ Terence E. Rosenberg, “Intermingled Bodies: Distributed Agency in an Expanded Appreciation of Making,” *Form Akademisk* 6, no. 2 (2013): 1. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7577/formakademisk.658>.

¹⁰⁴ Ingold, *Making*, 14; “That’s Enough About Ethnography!” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 1 (2014): 393. Indeed, the close alignment of Ingold and other anthropologists’ theories with Pragmatist philosophy has been tellingly and perhaps diplomatically described as “still under-explored, to say the least.” See footnote commentary in Stefan Beck, “The Problem of Expertise: From Experience to Skilful Practices to Expertise - Ecological and Pragmatist Perspectives,” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (2015): 9. Available online at: <http://ejpap.revues.org/346>.

¹⁰⁵ Adamson, *The Craft Reader*, 241.

twentieth century art historian Henri Focillon characterizes art as an exchange between a material's qualities and artisanal will.¹⁰⁶

Collectively, these views point to the being of both objects and subjects as an active and interconnected *becoming*, reflected in Deweyan and New Materialist philosophies of movement that describe the world as a changing field of matter in motion. Dewey's transaction-oriented aesthetics is itself reflected in Ingold's subtle distinction between acquired and grown skill, where skill is not acquired but rather grown and incorporated into the organism through practice in an environment. In other words, skill is a two-way street, and more than simply the acquisition of bodily technique. These transactional models allude to a field of forces where matter is not stable but immanent—an "active participant in the world's becoming"—and where the body is a dynamic "bundle of potentials" in an ever-unfolding interdependent field of agential forces.¹⁰⁷

In this flat aesthetic account, the experience of making transcends what theorist Terence Rosenberg calls "a narrowcast anthropocentric crafting."¹⁰⁸ Instead of the idea of making as maker-material-tool interaction, agency is decentralized from its maker-material entanglement to an even larger "meshwork of contingencies" of varying degrees of force, all acting on "the event of making."¹⁰⁹ In fact, not only does matter actively shape human knowing, the idea of agency itself appears to rest on a false premise and 'puts the cart before the horse' by being attributed to humans or things. Confusion about agency is, like craft, another catachrestic effect: we are forced to use a language of human causation, or "means-ends" model of creativity, to convey growth and becoming. Causality has figured in philosophical debates since Aristotle's inquiries into human action and artistic production. However, in a flat aesthetic account, causation is not

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 360.

¹⁰⁷ Ingold, *Making*, 81, 95-97.

¹⁰⁸ Rosenberg, "Intermingled Bodies," 1.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 17.

predicated solely upon human intentionality or even object agency, but rather describes a network that is “possessed by action,” so agency is a result of material engagement itself, what philosopher Karen Barad describes as an enactment rather than a property of humans or objects.¹¹⁰ Significantly, this same active sense of bringing into being evoked by *poiesis*, from the ancient Greek verb *poien* (to make), the root word of poetry, is also captured in the Deweyan notion of matter as in a constant process of merging with its environment.¹¹¹ Perhaps flat aesthetics indeed leads back to ideas that have been lost in translation.

The flat aesthetic shift to a dynamic, temporal and interactive vision is the philosophical counterpart to critical craft’s theoretical shift to “verbing.” The implications of this perspective for making are dramatically highlighted in the reconceptualization of skill as not a quality or individual property but, as Ingold describes, “the total field of relations constituted by the presence of the organism-person, indissolubly body and mind, in a richly structured environment.”¹¹² This flattened idea of making as relational clearly resonates with Dewey’s exhilarating statement that art is a “unique transcript of the energy of the things of the world.”¹¹³ New Materialist philosopher Timothy Morton likewise bypasses the inherited association of causality with human agency, instead arguing for causality as “wholly an *aesthetic* phenomenon.”¹¹⁴ He introduces the notion of the causal-aesthetic dimension to describe a dynamic network of agential energies “where action takes place.”¹¹⁵ Morton argues that the notion of the aesthetic as a causal dimension expands our potential to speculate on the world beyond encounters between humans and objects. He includes in this dimension everyday events

¹¹⁰ Ingold, *Making*, 97.

¹¹¹ Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 42.

¹¹² Tim Ingold, *Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2011), 353.

¹¹³ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 185.

¹¹⁴ Morton, *Realistic Magic*, 19-20.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

like “when saw bites into a fresh piece of plywood,” or any number of interrelations between non-human objects, further claiming that “when you make or study art, you are making or studying causality.” As with Harman’s work, Morton’s theory provides a twenty-first century articulation of causality as relationality that seems to lay the groundwork for an explicitly New Materialist aesthetics.¹¹⁶

Metcalf’s call a generation ago resonates still: the importance and relevance of making to everyday life means it deserves to be understood on its own terms, beyond where craft’s oppositional paths have led. Making is envisioned as a theoretical ground for all creative production, as illustrated with Ingold’s notion that all art can be thought of as historically specific instances of doing and undergoing—in short, as special cases of making, or “peak doing.”¹¹⁷ It may seem counterintuitive to understand art as a subset of craft but this proposition becomes clearer when bolstered by a flat aesthetic foundation. Flat ontologies not only help us to account for ordinary making as a subject of art history, but also enable a holistic account of making as that which subtends all artistic production. Returning to the Deweyan topographic map, one might imagine craft as residing at a denser “peak,” which rises from (or is nested within) a wider plane of everyday making, which itself rises from a more generalized plane of doing, followed by experience that engages in the senses other than touch. In this hypothetical graphic model of experience, craft is the Deweyan peak experience *par excellence* of the “live creature” in its environment, cutting across subject-object, thought-action, and being-knowing divides. In effect, flat ontologies create a sort of figure-ground reversal in the classificatory order, and locate craft as a vastly more capacious field of inquiry encompassing the sum of everyday aesthetic practices within which art (and everything else) lies. In this inverted

¹¹⁶ Harman’s most widely discussed concept of causal relations is “allure,” used to describe “aesthetic effects,” or the ways in which objects encounter one another. See Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005).

¹¹⁷ Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 131.

paradigm, everyday aesthetic practice corresponds to a sphere not unlike what Eagleton refers to as “the whole of our sensate life together”—where “our” refers to both human and non-human objects, and experience refers not to the sum of sense data perceived by a particular human subject, but to a collective field of relations.¹¹⁸ As Higgins puts it, experience is a kind of connective tissue.¹¹⁹

Conclusion

Flat aesthetics can affect art historical discussions of everyday craft either methodologically or foundationally. In drawing on a philosophical framework that supersedes art historical models, Higgins not only makes visible what she understands as Fluxus’ essence as experience; in her words, she also “builds the cultural frame around the work, and not the other way around.”¹²⁰ While her approach departs from the art historicization of Fluxus, it is arguable whether Higgins in fact builds a cultural frame or whether her use of Deweyan aesthetics simply adopts a previously ignored theory as an interpretive method.

This raises the question of whether a flat ontological paradigm should be relegated to the status of a theory. Subject to academic fashions and an art historical version of what literary theorist Rita Felski calls “the limits of critique,”¹²¹ New Materialism as critical method arguably becomes one among many used for interpretive or “decoding” purposes that taken as a whole are unanswerable to the more difficult, deeper questioning of art and its categories. An example of the kind of facile equation this approach can produce is the idea that the Duchampian legacy of contingent meaning (“the viewer completes the work”) constitutes philosophical correlationism,

¹¹⁸ Eagleton, “The Ideology of the Aesthetic,” 328.

¹¹⁹ Hannah Higgins, interviewed by Jeff Abell, *Mouthtomouth* (Winter 2014), accessed March 15, 2017. <http://mouthtomouthmag.com/higgins.html>.

¹²⁰ Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, 183.

¹²¹ See Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

because contemporary art exists only in correlation to the human.¹²² It strikes me that this claim, at best tautologically true, trivializes and distorts the concept of correlationism.

Critical analysis is a mainstay of art history, and it is often gratifying to see philosophy “put to use.” But flat aesthetics has the potential to contribute to a larger shift in cultural structures, with implications for art and cultural production that exceed its use as an interpretive tool, arguably a “second-order” form of inquiry. Philosopher and theorist Laura Cull echoes this concern in her critique of scholarly discourse surrounding philosophies of immanence and its relation to ephemeral art practices. She questions the reduction of artworks to case studies or illustrative examples, arguing we should go beyond “applying philosophical concepts to art ‘examples’.”¹²³

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously said that “aesthetics and ethics are one,” and indeed in many cultures the concepts of aesthetics and ethics are linked.¹²⁴ Dewey’s work has been associated with the utopianism of both the Arts and Crafts movement and early twentieth-century avant-garde movements, while New Materialism has been seen by some authors as a catalyst to societal change reminiscent of 1960s counterculture ideals.¹²⁵ Significantly, these authors suggest that to be truly radical, New Materialism must draw attention to daily interactions in the material environment, a call to action that implies our engagement with everyday making.¹²⁶

¹²² Suhail Malik, “Reason to Destroy Contemporary Art,” in *Realism Materialism Art*, eds. Cox, Jaskey, and Malik (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College / Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 185. See online at <http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/reason-destroy-contemporary-art>.

¹²³ Cull, “Performance as Philosophy,” 20.

¹²⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914-1916*, eds. Georg Henrik von Wright and Gertrude E. M. Anscombe, translated by Gertrude E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), 77.

¹²⁵ Diana Coole, “From Within the Midst of Things: New Sensibility, New Alchemy and the Renewal of Critical Theory,” in *Realism Materialism Art*, eds. Cox et al., 44.

¹²⁶ Diane Coole and Samantha Frost, introduction to *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

Jane Bennett captures the sense of this ethical imperative in her call to “transform our sense of care.”¹²⁷ The analogous concept of attention, as revealed by its etymological root (the Latin *attendere*, meaning to stretch toward), implies a reaching beyond oneself to the world. Attention has to do with the relinquishing of human will and becoming attuned to matter beyond oneself: to a flattening of relations. In this way, attention, which implies good care, is both an aesthetic and ethical concept. In a flat aesthetic account, making becomes a ready-at-hand concept to describe the particular push-pull among human and non-human energies, and attention is the mechanism that determines the quality of that interaction. Indeed, the process of learning embodied skills is described as an “education of attention” and the focus on “attentiveness training” in Fluxus was similarly thought of as training for “the good life.”¹²⁸ As Kaprow recalls, “doing life, consciously, was a compelling notion to me” and a valuable introduction to “right living.”¹²⁹

Like avant-garde and counterculture practices, craft is a call to integrate theory and praxis. The counterculture’s focus on craft reveals how taking care and pleasure in making as an attitude to everyday life was, and still is, a political act. It is a lineage that is being reclaimed by contemporary “craftivists” and theorists.¹³⁰ In spite of profound changes to everyday life in the post-industrial context, making remains a crucial relationship between human and non-human things and thus has real-world importance. Pragmatism has been referred to as a form of “theoretical activism,”¹³¹ and indeed Dewey’s concern for “the good life” is palpable throughout *Art as Experience*—for instance, when he expounds on the moral and practical implications of

¹²⁷ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, back cover.

¹²⁸ Ingold, *Making*, 2.

¹²⁹ Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, 195, 225.

¹³⁰ For example, see David Gauntlett, *Making is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity, from DIY and Knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011), 57.

¹³¹ John Giordano, “Between Conviviality and Antagonism: Transactionalism in Contemporary Art Social Practice and Political Life” (PhD diss., Union Institute and University, 2015), 230.

aesthetic experience, highlighting older civilizations whose everyday aesthetic life holistically integrated communal and practical needs.¹³² Flat aesthetics carries an implicit call to rescue what has been called the “lost function” of the aesthetic, by addressing the conditions under which these aesthetic modalities have been lost.¹³³ In this way, everyday making implies both an aesthetic and ethical practice.

This thesis takes up Metcalf’s call for a recovery of craft’s—and art’s—broader purpose and for unwieldy ethical concepts like “the good life” to actively shape culture and guide everyday life. It encourages renewed attention to Dewey and other philosophical work that constructs a broader cultural framework for understanding craft as a kind of experience, just as Higgins does by drawing on Dewey to understand Fluxus as a density of experience. The cluster of ideas presented here is just the start of the story and I hope it illuminates possible directions for more substantial research about the relationship between flat aesthetics and everyday material practice.

It is of course not unanimously certain that this domain needs critical attention. Adamson refers to craft practices that lie outside the purview of contemporary visual arts discourse as a “lagoon” (i.e. a sheltered position) and argues “not all craft demands critical analysis.”¹³⁴ I argue vehemently against this stance and believe the focus should shift to the periphery of the topographic map, and that not only the traditional craftspeople to which he refers, but also “everything else” should become part of craft history’s purview, through attention to the mundane bodily engagement of everyday making. Making needs analysis and attention precisely because it is about everyday life, which itself implies an ethical dimension.

¹³² Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 327.

¹³³ João Ribas, “What Is It That Makes Today’s Realism So Different, So Appealing?” in *Realism Materialism Art*, eds. Cox et al., 346.

¹³⁴ Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 169.

This thesis has focused on Euro-Western philosophies and did not attempt to discuss Indigenous thinking on these issues, but Indigenous cosmological frameworks also form part of a broader picture that includes other ways of thinking about flat ontologies and their potential impact on the boundaries of the everyday. The notion that creative production arises from a network of creative forces introduces questions about the dynamics of influence and appropriation between Eurocentric worldviews and much older materialisms. Indeed, New Materialist calls for a flat ontology that applies equally to humans and “the primitive psyches of rocks”¹³⁵ borrows heavily from Indigenous intellectual traditions in which there is no animate/inanimate dichotomy and in which languages have the capacity to articulate that reality.¹³⁶ As educator and author Leroy Little Bear explains of Plains Indians’ immanent and relational philosophy, everything is “more or less animate [...]. If everything is animate, then everything has spirit and knowledge. If everything has spirit and knowledge, then all are like me. If all are like me, then all are my relations.”¹³⁷ The Cree concept of *mamatowisowin* likewise captures a sense of a creative life force that connects all creation.¹³⁸

Some contemporary Dewey scholars, notably American philosopher Scott Pratt, insist upon Dewey’s debt to Indigenous concepts, arguing that American Pragmatism “emerged from a complex environment characterized by both colonial and Indigenous attitudes.”¹³⁹ Dewey did not acknowledge Indigenous sources for his theories, although, having written his work over eight

¹³⁵ Graham Harman, *Quadruple Objects* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 103.

¹³⁶ Irving Hallowell, quoted in Jessica Horton and Janet Berlo, “Beyond the Mirror: Indigenous Ecologies and ‘New Materialisms’ in Contemporary Art,” *Third Text* 27 (January 2013): 17.

¹³⁷ Leroy Little Bear, “Jagged Worldviews Colliding,” in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, ed. Marie Battiste (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 78.

¹³⁸ Farrell Racette, “‘I Want to Call Their Names in Resistance,’” 290.

¹³⁹ In their anthology *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), editors Diane Coole and Samantha Frost state that New Materialism is “not brand new by any account” and refer to the book’s essays as “renewed” materialisms that engage with older or marginalized materialist texts. Indeed, Coole and Frost, along with political theorist Jane Bennett, are among the few authors who acknowledge the influence of Indigenous thought on the development of New Materialist flat ontologies.

decades ago, this failure comes as no surprise. What is generally recognized as distinctively American philosophy arises from the influences of both European and Native thought on key figures in the movement throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”¹⁴⁰ In a reciprocal recognition, Indigenous author Daniel Wildcat declares Dewey as the philosopher whose notion of experience “came closer than any modern Western thinker to capturing the ontological and epistemological foundation of Native world views.”¹⁴¹ Before the flat ontologies of Indigenous, Deweyan and New Materialist thought can be fully adopted as a platform for scholarly research on craft and making practices, the legacies of appropriation and entwinements of influence that have so shaped our everyday lives will require further consideration. Questions of territories and influence are unavoidable here, at many levels.

Aesthetics is a culturally contingent and relatively recent discipline. It is not timeless; rather, as Sandra Corse states, it has “a history, a beginning, and possibly an end.”¹⁴² If art history is a discourse that spreads its values worldwide, then despite its vast repertoire of methodologies, it cannot afford *not* to address flat aesthetic frameworks.¹⁴³ Yet one peril of broadening art historical discussions is that craft may spread beyond recognition and no longer be comfortably absorbed into art history or even performance studies. Should global textile consumption and workers’ rights be the purview of art history departments? Is this ethical and political issue—that is, concerned with “the good life”—an example of the “craft-related thinking” Adamson argues is part of the subject matter that has been the responsibility of art

¹⁴⁰ Scott Pratt, *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), xvii.

¹⁴¹ Daniel Wildcat, “Indigenizing the Future: Why We Must Think Spatially in the Twenty-First Century,” *American Studies* 46 (Fall-Winter 2005): 440.

¹⁴² Corse, *Craft Objects, Aesthetic Contexts*, 4.

¹⁴³ Donald Preziosi, “Globalization and its Discontents,” in *The Art of Art History: a Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 404.

institutions all along?¹⁴⁴ A parallel and even more radical implication of a New Materialist paradigm suggests that the discipline of art risks “annihilating its own identity,” artist and author Amanda Beech warns, in the call to relinquish the art-exceptionality equation and thus the very concept of art as “a word for difference.”¹⁴⁵

Whereas aesthetics as originally conceived is epistemological, Deweyan and New Materialist models cast it rather as “first philosophy,” or metaphysics. That is to say, these theories no longer conceive of aesthetics as part of an epistemological framework, but rather as an entire ontological framework that describes the structure of reality. Dewey’s work is a reminder that aesthetic experience is a challenge to systematic thought, and that a theory of aesthetics should test the system’s capacity to grasp the nature of experience itself.¹⁴⁶ As philosopher Kevin Decker argues, by stating that art is experience in its integrity, Dewey refutes the idea of knowledge as the quintessential human experience and elevates aesthetic experience to that unifying role in philosophy. As a corollary to this idea, a post-oppositional concept of making belongs to the same metaphysical order of inquiry as ontology (being) and epistemology (knowing), perhaps as a bridge between the two. Decker corroborates this idea in proposing that the aesthetic dimension of craft practices represents what Dewey calls “experience in its integrity.”¹⁴⁷

While there is much scepticism regarding the depth and breadth of New Materialist claims, the claim of flat aesthetics remains sound.¹⁴⁸ This is an aesthetics in the broadest possible sense of the term, which upends its relationship to epistemology, just as everyday craft upends its

¹⁴⁴ Adamson, *The Craft Reader*, 340.

¹⁴⁵ Amanda Beech, “Concept without Difference: The Promise of the Generic,” in *Realism Materialism Art*, eds. Cox et al., 298.

¹⁴⁶ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 192.

¹⁴⁷ Decker, “Refiguring Art and Craft in Dewey,” 2. See also Wendy Landry, “How Crafts Matter: Mapping the Terrain of Crafts Study” (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2010), 303.

¹⁴⁸ See, for example, Nathan Brown, “The Nadir of *OOO*: From Graham Harman’s *Tool-Being*, to Timothy Morton’s *Realistic Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*,” *Parrhesia* 17 (2013).

relationship to artistic practice. However, some argue that New Materialism follows the trend of the “return to the object” in spirit only: that is, by superficially focusing on objects without truly advancing an ontological framework. Harman, for example, has been criticized for reintroducing a form of Kantianism despite his best intentions.¹⁴⁹ Whether New Materialism reiterates or supplants Kant, flat aesthetics as an ontological proposition challenges the foundations of aesthetics and makes new sets of questions possible. Artists and theorists agree that, even more than a “philosophical adventure,” the new paradigm should engender “not only new themes for art practices, exhibitions and cultural production, but also starkly different ways of making, perceiving, thinking and distributing them.”¹⁵⁰ Perhaps even more significantly, this new paradigm proposes, not “yet another specialized epistemology to academic knowledge production,” but rather to “rewrite academia as a whole, including the disciplinary boundaries that organize it.”¹⁵¹ When the ontological boundary between art and attentively tying your shoelaces, carving a spoon, screaming until you lose your voice (Dick Higgins’ *Danger Music*), or making a salad (Alison Knowles’ *Making a Salad*) is no longer an art historical question, what meta-art-historical questions then present themselves?

Philosophy reveals and questions our deepest assumptions about existence and the nature of experience. Harman observes that the work of philosophers is to either create or destroy gaps in the cosmos, as in Plato’s ontological division between appearances and ideal forms or Kant’s epistemological division between *phenomena* and *noumena*.¹⁵² As the term suggests, flat aesthetics would seem to fall into the category of a theoretical system that destroys gaps, a

¹⁴⁹ Andrew Cole, “The Call of Things: A Critique of Object-Oriented Ontologies,” *Minnesota Review* 80 (2013): 114.

¹⁵⁰ Christoph Cox, Jenny Jaskey, and Suhail Malik, editorial introduction to *Realism Materialism Art*, 30.

¹⁵¹ Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, “Introduction: A ‘New Tradition’ in Thought,” in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, 2012 (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 89.

¹⁵² Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2012), 2.

desirable proposition that might imply a promise to reunite craft with *technē*. This claim potentially garners two objections. The first concerns dilution: as one philosopher argues, accounting for somatic experience “down to an itch” may imply the “hyper-aestheticization of everyday life” and an intolerable loss of criteria for distinguishing the ordinary from the extraordinary: the seemingly inescapable exceptionality issue once again.¹⁵³ The second concerns absorption: flat aesthetics could be accused of reverting to grand narratives, proffering yet another hegemonizing aesthetic model while masquerading as a utopia, or what Rosenberg calls “the dream of a trans-anthropocentric ethics of making.”¹⁵⁴ Such objections notwithstanding, it is fascinating to speculate how aesthetics and everyday life might change if flat ontologies’ call for attentive engagement with the material world were to take hold, motivating a global plurality of approaches to thinking, being and making.

Flat ontologies summon a holistic worldview where subjects and objects blend in a way that seems intuitively to correspond to ordinary experience, to Dewey's “everyday events, doings, and sufferings” that holds the promise of aesthetic experience, if only we pay attention. The flatter our ontological vision becomes, the more extraordinary the ordinary becomes. This implicit insight was evident through my experience of everyday crafting and farming practices, as it surely was to Fluxus practitioners. When a lack of subject-object distinction is what counts as aesthetic experience, the discourse enables a way of talking about everyday making that art history’s vestige of divisiveness disallows. Recognizing the limitations of that legacy allows us to focus on intertwining forces and see craft as a key to exploring the multivalent networks that bind humans and the world. If making constitutes an arena of mutual interaction, we would do

¹⁵³ Sherri Irvin, “Scratching an Itch,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (Winter 2008): 33.

¹⁵⁴ Rosenberg, “Intermingled Bodies,” 9.

well to recognize the other players in the experience, and pay attention to how we mutually transform and are transformed.

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