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Making Concepts

At the entrance to the Albers exhibition dedicated to the artist couple at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris,[1] an oil on canvas by Joseph and a tapestry by Anni were hung side by side. Strangely, the spatial juxtaposition seemed to erase the differences between the two mediums. The superimposition of the colors gave the flat canvas a depth similar to that of the intertwining threads; the weft of the textile seemed palpable beneath the paint. Is there still a need to distinguish between painting and tapestry? Were the visitors not looking at fabric covered with paint and a painting made of colored fibers?

Lately, art-historical views on the relationship between art and craft have changed. In the introduction to a special issue of *Images re-vues*, Francesca Cozzolino and Thomas Golsenne have noted that the boundaries that once separated them are now "porous."[2] Elissa Auther has studied the works of fiber artists, postminimalist artists, and feminist artists to reflect on the hierarchy of art and craft,[3] while Julia Bryan-Wilson has examined the political significance of textiles, using a variety of cases from both categories.[4] Another way to subvert the division between these two mediums is to describe one through characteristics usually attributed to the other. Glenn Adamson has argued, for instance, that craft can give rise to theoretical thinking.[5] It is also possible to start from conceptual art—the twentieth-century movement that most clearly associated art and concept—but to foreground its materiality[6] or the way it is fabricated.

The first book to emerge from our research on modes of production in contemporary art[7] brought together numerous interviews with artists and art fabricators. It started with statements by conceptual artists who denied the importance of making—often in contradiction with their actual practice—and moved from there to the question of craft. In this new book, we take a different approach. From the outset, we stress the importance of both art and craft and situate them as anchor points for our thinking. Although the hands of the artists discussed here are not always at work in a literal sense, the notion of craft is an integral part of their oeuvre, critically and theoretically linked to concept.

Another feature distinguishes this book from the first: our research on art and craft involves works that do not come solely from North America and Western Europe and thus

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111018737-001

introduces a corpus that includes practices on other continents. Our goal was to propose new ways of examining works based on the adoption of different and distinctive perspectives. But how could such an approach be applied to studying the relationship between art and craft, notions that have a long history in Europe? In a colonial context, the European system imposed itself as the only valid way of thinking about art, which led to the effacement of unique local practices in other cultures. Going back in time to find precolonial modes of making art would have been impracticable,[8] but it is possible to observe how European notions of art and craft have been conceived and put to the test in works by contemporary artists from other parts of the world.

Handcrafting and craftsmanship obviously underpin a great deal of artistic production. Yet despite current interest, we did not make the interconnections between art and craft the starting point of our examination. The history of Western art coincides with its separation from craft; one could even go so far as to argue that the notion of art, at least since the Italian Renaissance, has been founded on the extirpation of anything involving manual work.[9] Given this history, we started our research from the standpoint of craft's dissociation from art. Anglo-American conceptual art appears to take the incompatibility of the two for granted: in the second half of the 1960s, the idealist theory once again prevailed,[10] as seen with Joseph Kosuth, who stated that a work of art coincides with the idea underpinning it, and with Sol LeWitt, who stated that the concept is the most important aspect of a work of art.

But this is not the entire story of so-called "conceptual" art. Its links to craft are much closer than assumed by Michael Petry, who claimed that the conceptualism that emerged in the mid-1960s had "had its day" and that "in its place has come a resurgent interest in the beautifully designed and produced object."[11] LeWitt, for one, never considered that an artwork was made up of the idea alone: the work still needed to materialize—and even be executed—according to the highest standards: "The plan exists as an idea but needs to be put into its optimum form,"[12] he wrote. That said, his wall drawings were not always executed with the utmost care;[13] sometimes, a bare adherence to his plan appears to be the only goal. Still, LeWitt also trained draftsmen or assistants to take charge of making his wall drawings.[14] The importance given to technical skill in his work grew steadily, to the point of eventually rivaling the idea.

There is more to LeWitt's wall drawings than their meticulous execution, however. It would be no exaggeration to say that LeWitt's texts offer a theory on art-making. In his 1967 "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," the separation between conception and execution is clear.[15] In keeping with Aristotelian tradition, the idea comes from the artist's head and is realized by the craftsman. Nothing disrupts the relationship between the plan and its execution, which one might call transparent. A few years later, the question became more complicated. In LeWitt's text "Doing Wall Drawings," published in 1971, one word in particular recurs: the verb "interpret" in the first lines of the text appears again in the third paragraph. The plan "is interpreted by the draftsman. . . . The artist must allow various interpretations of his plan."[16] If one has to go through layers of interpretation to be able to execute a wall drawing, it is

because "making" does not reside simply in the literal materialization of an idea: "The draftsman perceives the artist's plan, then reorders it to his own experience and understanding."[17]

No instructions can exhaust everything involved in making. When the draftsman starts to work, he must deal with a range of issues that are not included in the plan. As LeWitt explains, the draftsman must make "decisions,"[18] which, furthermore, not only concern the execution of the wall drawings but also participate in their conception. "There are decisions which the draftsman makes, within the plan, *as part of the plan*."[19] Here, making becomes the idea. The demarcation line that LeWitt had drawn in 1967 between fabrication and conception thus becomes blurred. The French artist Emilie Parendeau, whose practice consists of "activating" works by other artists, understands this perfectly. When she chose to make a new artwork from LeWitt's *Wall Drawing #43* (1970), one might have expected her to assume the role of draftswoman and produce the work.[20] Not at all—instead, she delegated the execution of the wall drawing to someone else. Her project *"A LOUER #6"* (2011) consists of modifying the plan for LeWitt's work, which she completed by adding the words "from edge to edge."[21] Parendeau thus intervened in the very conception of LeWitt's piece.

In the history of Western art, drawing is the medium most closely linked to the intellect.[22] It literally serves to externalize the idea. The location of the boundary, which in LeWitt's work separates concept from execution, is therefore far from trivial. Is it possible to delegate the execution of what is inside someone's mind? To make a wall drawing, the draftsman must, at a given moment, go beyond the instructions and assume the function of creator. Executing the work involves an irreducible part of conception, as LeWitt emphasized: "The draftsman's contributions are unforeseen by the artist, even if he, the artist, is the draftsman."[23] The protocol for his wall drawings can even be seen as an investigation of or reflection on making, an aspect that brings LeWitt's thinking close to that of Duchamp. Neither LeWitt's delegation nor Duchamp's ready-made reveals a lack of interest in making. On the contrary, both are the limit points of a making-oriented experiment. Fabrication is put to the test at the two extremes: not making, and making like a craftsman.

At the beginning of the second half of the 1990s, Georges Didi-Huberman set out to reintroduce the "question of technique" in the discussion of Duchampian art.[24] He showed that it was of interest to articulate the ready-made in terms of what is presented as its antithesis, the handmade: "That is why the 'abandonment of skill' that the *readymade* seems to signify should be dialectically articulated with a series of statements in which Duchamp *reclaims 'making*,' and artisanal making in particular."[25] Some twenty years later, Lars Blunck adopted this same viewpoint in his study of ready-mades.[26] To begin with, he observed that Duchamp had made extensive use of the word "making" in his notes.[27] According to Blunck, Duchamp's question "Can we make works that are not art?" referred to two contradictory things.[28] First, he understood the word "art" in the etymological sense—from the Latin *ars*, meaning skill or craft, the equivalent of the Greek *techné*—meaning a work that is "not art" is one in which the artist's hand does not intervene. This was the side of the ready-made. But Duchamp also understood the word "art" in relation to handiwork or craft, meaning a work that is "not art"

is craft. And the importance of craft is palpable in both his words and his works, including *Chèque Tzanck* (1919), the *Porte de la rue Larrey* (1927) or the papier-mâché model dated to 1938, from which the miniature urinal for the *Boîte-en-valise* was made.[29]

The opposition of art and craft seems here to drive ways of thinking about making—first with regard to their separation, then surpassing this separation. Both Duchamp and LeWitt proceeded from one extreme to the other: from eliminating the use of the hand to supposedly give free rein to inventiveness (ready-made, plan) to working as craftsmen (reproducing instead of creating, executing a work by following instructions). But the disjunction of art and craft takes on a whole new dimension in the context of European colonization. In our attempt to broaden the corpus of research beyond Western artistic production, it was important that we not lose sight of the fact that this division made it impossible for practices of the colonized to attain the status of art:[30] what was made by the Other, by non-Europeans, could at most be considered craft. In his inaugural lecture for the Hebrew, Chaldaic, and Syriac language course at the Collège de France in 1862, Ernest Renan dismissed the contributions of the "Semitic peoples," claiming that "they have but little of Art in them and concluding that "our Art comes entirely from Greece."[31]

The exhibition *Global Conceptualism*, held in 1999 at the Queens Museum of Art, broke with the habitual classification of non-Western works as craft.[32] Putting an end to the dichotomy between center and periphery, the exhibition's organizers showed that conceptual art originated concurrently in several parts of the world, from a multitude of "points of origin." This was undoubtedly a laudable, even generous undertaking. Non-Western creators were no longer relegated to the bottom rung of the European art-making hierarchy, where they were considered craftsmen. But what about artists from the Middle East? How can we understand their absence from *Global Conceptualism*? Was this due to the persistence of the prejudices assimilated by Renan in his day? More generally, we need to ask whether a reversal such as the one put forth in *Global Conceptualism* truly constituted a change in thinking. If we apply the label "conceptual art" to works produced independent of the Anglo-American movement, are we not still claiming that a Western notion—in this case, conceptualism—can be universally applied?

Art historians engaged in producing a global narrative have sometimes expressed the wish for culturally specific terms for the non-Western works that they study. Atreyee Gupta and Sugata Ray have, on the contrary, been particularly eloquent in describing cultural purity and authenticity, which scholars of former colonies can be expected to reveal, as yet another Western myth.[33] It is certainly unrealistic to imagine that beyond colonization, we can find a pure theoretical framework free of Western notions. The impossibility of creating work independent of the Western system is also true of contemporary artists. We need only look at their education: many of them have studied in Western Europe or in the United States, and, even if this were not the case, the notions of art and craft and the distinction between them have infiltrated colonized countries, in particular through the establishment of schools that imitate European institutions.[34]

The case studies brought together in this volume focus on concept and craft in different ways. Circumventing the handmade can be a way of regaining the status of the artist long denied to those pushed to the margins of the Western world. Conversely, the notion of craft offers an opportunity to reconnect with local and regional modes of production, beyond the disrespect with which they were regarded in colonial times, and to show that artisanal skill is a vital part of artistic practice. Here, we approach the notions of art and craft from the perspective of their long history, which, at least since the Italian Renaissance, has been one of exclusion. We begin neither by collapsing the boundary between art and craft nor by intertwining the two. We start instead from the perspective of their antagonism, observing how artists from various parts of the world test the notions of idea and concept by reflecting on what has been erased by the Western art-theoretical discourse, namely skilled craftsmanship.

The first part of this volume examines the role of technical skills in executing artworks. In the European art system, which, according to Larry Shiner, developed during the eighteenth century, the notion of skill is no longer relevant to the artist's qualities but is clearly pushed to the side of the craftsman.[35] It is associated with the body and with mechanical execution, whereas artists are supposed to create freely, like nature, their minds taking precedence over their bodies. Complicating the division between artist and craftsman, the first part of the book looks at skill in relation to practices valued for their conceptual characteristics. The importance of craft in Franz Erhard Walther's work is inscribed in the very structure of Erik Verhagen's essay. At first central, the figure of the artist is gradually supplanted by the person able to produce his works through sewing—in this case, Johanna Walther, the artist's first wife. In my essay, I explore how Ana Lupas, an artist trained in the field of tapestry and first known as a fiber artist, has drawn on her weaving skills to create collective actions that can be retrospectively linked to conceptualism.

The second part of the book proposes a reversal of the relationship between idea and material. While it might appear that, in a veritable conceptual practice, materials are only valued as the support for an idea, the cases examined here, although they stem from conceptual and postconceptual art, are free from such idealism. The subject of Christian Berger's essay is the paradox at the heart of Lawrence Weiner's work. On the one hand, the artist believes that, in order to exist as such, a work of art does not necessarily have to be fabricated. On the other hand, he describes his work as resulting entirely from his dialogue with the material. In his essay, Niko Vicario evokes a literary genre—the novel of circulation, or "it-narrative"—to examine the use of metal in works by Simon Starling, Pedro Reyes, and Hiwa K. He shows that the idea, far from controlling the way a project takes shape, is in fact engendered by working with metal: the material is not a mere means of expression but the driving force behind the work.

The third part of the book examines contemporary artistic positions that rethink the notions of the artisanal and the conceptual in the context of European colonization.[36] Nadia Radwan's essay begins with observations on the close link between craft and primitivism in Western discourse. From the European perspective, the colonized Other was at best a crafts-

man for whom creating a work of art would remain forever out of reach. Radwan shows that contemporary artists from the Middle East, her major focus here, have been able to move beyond these colonial connotations of craft; they use artisanal processes not only to create conceptual works, but also to reconnect with a long history of regional practices. The question of craft is posed quite differently in Chonja Lee's essay. The artists she studies are reticent about using craft but remain aware that, still, they sometimes may have to present themselves as possessors of artisanal skills to exist in the globalized art scene. The use of wax print textiles allows them to act as if they conform to this role: although based on industrial processes, their works appear to be handmade, thus manifesting the expectations projected onto them as non-Western creators.

The three essays gathered in the last section of the book develop the relationship between idea and making in different ways. In his essay on Ian Burn, Kim Charnley contradicts the thesis that the members of the Art & Language collective are, along with Joseph Kosuth, the most uncompromising practitioners of conceptual art. He does not present Burn as an artist-artisan—despite the fact that his biography seems to support this premise—instead showing how Burn posed the question of making in a new way in each of his works, most often drawing on the medium of language. Jean-Marie Bolay and Bénédicte le Pimpec focus on the notion of delegation in the work of John M Armleder. They observe that the artist entrusts others with the task of executing his works but, paradoxically, without concealing his pleasure in doing the work himself. Even more surprisingly, Armleder delegates not just the execution of the work but also its conception. Brenda Schmahmann's essay focuses on South Africa, examining in particular works by Senzeni Marasela and Christine Dixie, two artists usually excluded in the history of South African conceptual art. By looking at their work from a conceptualist angle, she gives a completely new dimension to the definition of the conceptualist idea that, rather than being determined before a work is executed, emerges from the very process of making.

Translated from the French by Laurie Hurwitz

Notes

1 Julia Garimorth, ed., *Anni et Josef Albers : l'art et la vie,* exh. cat. (Paris: Paris Musées, 2021).
2 Francesca Cozzolino and Thomas Golsenne, eds., "Par-delà art et artisanat : Approches processuelles et matérielles de la création," *Images re-vues : Histoire, anthropologie et théorie de l'art*, special issue no. 7 (2019), https://doi.org/10.4000/imagesrevues.6321.
3 Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
4 Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
5 Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).
6 See Christian Berger, *Conceptualism and Materiality: Matters of Art and Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).
7 Ileana Parvu, Jean-Marie Bolay, Bénédicte le Pimpec, and Valérie Mavridorakis, eds., *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire : Entretiens sur la production de l'art contemporain* (Geneva: Haute école d'art et de design; Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2021).
8 Frantz Fanon's remarks about language in the West Indies or about psychological mechanisms in Madagascar can certainly be applied to ways of making things as well; the upheaval caused by colonization is responsible for their disappearance. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), pp. 25, 70.
9 Georges Didi-Huberman considers that Vasari intentionally failed to mention the contribution wax workers (*ceraiuoli*) made to sculptures by Donatello or Verrocchio, and that the *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* thus, in a sense, invents "some well-crafted legends" about art. See "Ressemblance mythifiée et ressemblance oubliée chez Vasari : la légende du portrait 'sur le vif,'" *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome : Italie et Méditerranée* 106, no. 2 (1994): 430–31.
10 This did not prevent Mel Bochner from taking a stand against conceptual art by writing "Language is not transparent" on the wall of the Dwan Gallery in New York in 1970. See James Meyer, ed., *Dwan Gallery: Los Angeles to New York, 1959–1971* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 84.
11 Michael Petry, *The Art of Not Making: The New Artist/Artisan Relationship* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), p. 6.
12 Sol LeWitt, "Doing Wall Drawings," *Art Now: New York* 3, no. 2 (June 1971), included in *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective*, ed. Gary Garrels (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2000), p. 376.
13 Parvu et al., *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire*, pp. 143–44.
14 Ibid., pp. 101–47.
15 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* (Summer 1967), included in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 12–16.
16 LeWitt, "Doing Wall Drawings," p. 376.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid. The italics are mine.
20 Parvu et al., *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire*, pp. 162–73.
21 Emilie Parendeau, "A LOUER #6," Mosquito Coast Factory, Campbon, 2011, https://www.alouer-project.net/?alouer=6.

22 Georges Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance par contact : Archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l'empreinte* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2009), p. 93.
23 LeWitt, "Doing Wall Drawings," p. 376.
24 Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'empreinte* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997), included in *La ressemblance par contact*, p. 215.
25 Ibid., p. 208 (translation by Laurie Hurwitz).
26 In this respect, it is surprising that Lars Blunck mentions Georges Didi-Huberman's study only marginally. Lars Blunck, *Duchamps Readymade* (Munich: Edition Metzel, 2017).
27 Ibid., p. 15.
28 Ibid., p. 17.
29 See Ecke Bonk, *Marcel Duchamp: The Box in a Valise* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), pp. 203–04.
30 See Jessica Gerschultz, *Decorative Arts of the Tunisian École: Fabrications of Modernism, Gender, and Power* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), p. 9.
31 Quoted in "Renan on the Shemitic Nations," *The Anthropological Review* 2, no. 4 (February 1864): 58. In French, Ernest Renan, *De la part des peuples sémitiques dans l'histoire de la civilisation,* Discours d'ouverture du cours de langues hébraïque, chaldaïque et syriaque au Collège de France (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1862), p. 16. My thanks to Nadia Radwan for bringing this text to my attention.
32 *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exh. cat. (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999).
33 Atreyee Gupta and Sugata Ray, "Responding from the Margins," in *Is Art History Global?*, ed. James Elkins (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 351.
34 On the establishment of schools of fine and applied arts in Egypt and Tunisia, see Nadia Radwan, *Les Modernes d'Égypte : Une renaissance transnationale des Beaux-Arts et des Arts appliqués* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017), pp. 69–95, and Gerschultz, *Decorative Arts of the Tunisian École*, p. 13.
35 Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 115.
36 I quote here Okwui Enwezor in his conversation with El Anatsui: "I want to explore a seeming paradox in your work: the tension between the artisanal and the conceptual that is always part of your practice. Is there any disjunction you feel between these two poles, the handmade, highly crafted nature of your work and yet that the work is mostly driven by ideas?" El Anatsui believes that there is nothing paradoxical about this way of working. See El Anatsui, "Cartographies of Uneven Exchange: The Fluidity of Sculptural Form: El Anatsui in Conversation with Okwui Enwezor," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 28 (Spring 2011), included in *Craft: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Tanya Harrod (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), p. 175.

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