

Life in Action: Conversations on Making and Being

by

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Abstract

This is a study of thresholds. Pay attention as you cross, and especially as you return because you will always be somewhere new, and you will never be the same person. My research draws on qualitative material from interviews with a professional woodworker and autoethnographic experiences gathered using arts-based methods to explore conversations between makers, their materials and their environments. Intuitive inquiry provides a framework for this learning. Considering aspects of conversation, expression, flow and joy, I review the impact of such conversation in the context of environmental learning and describe the importance of liminal space in circular processes of making and being, where learning is both ongoing and emergent. I conclude that active presence in this space encourages self-awareness in relation to the world outside oneself, transforms both materials and perceptions-of-self, and so allows the makers studied to shape futures that incorporate understanding of human relations as ecological relations.

Keywords: making, environment, intuitive inquiry, flow, arts-based, sentient ecology

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All images in this document were taken by Samantha Wilde.

Introduction

Walking in, I am immediately immersed in wood dust. The shop is bright and meticulously kept, but the smell is everywhere. It is comforting and reminds me of my father and middle school woodwork class. Eight work benches are divided into two rows separated by a large planer. A chop saw sits on the south wall, and a table saw waits in the corner across from it. Jeremy has organized long boards for a student project into tall cubbies along the east wall. The north wall opens into four small multi-purpose rooms, each not much bigger than a walk-in closet. One contains a shop sink, a bench grinder and sharpening stone, a tiny library and, most importantly, supplies for making tea. Jeremy asks me several times if I would like a cup. After about an hour, I give in and wait another twenty minutes for the earl grey to cool enough to drink; my throat is sore from talking, but I feel like Jeremy could go on forever. He moves constantly. His ankles twirl as he sits atop a workbench; his legs swing like a child's in a tall chair. His hands wave as he speaks, or they find something to hold onto while he thinks. His eyes and his mouth play too, smiling excitedly with the conversation.

Students filter in as we talk. I am introduced to each of them before they quietly recover their projects and begin to work. I watch teenagers and retirees consider each other's work, providing second opinions when asked. Occasionally, one of them will catch Jeremy's eye and he leaves to lend a higher level of expertise. Unlike his students, who are mostly dressed in dusty t-shirts and frayed jeans, Jeremy is invariably stylish, with sharp-collared shirts in colourful patterns, suspenders and polished leather boots. Nevertheless, he seems more at home here than anywhere else I can imagine him. He appears close to his students, asking as much about life outside the studio as about the project at hand. I am happy to sit at the edge of the room and watch until he rejoins our conversation.

I discover that Jeremy trained and worked as an aircraft mechanic before becoming a mechanical engineer. He did not have the grades to go directly to university; despite interest in learning generally, he credits his success in a few subjects to the passion of his teachers. He describes his experience in the workforce, which echoes his time in academia. “Engineering,” he says, “can be really fun. And oddly enough, engineering can be creative. But the way engineering is taught is so not creative, it’s just not funny.” He admits he hated his life during his years working as an engineer, that he simply was not cut out for the “mind-numbing bureaucracy of paperwork and meetings full of obfuscation and lying. Get me to an honest life,” he said. And so began the Urban Woodworker and the Community Woodworking Studio. Many years after becoming a professional woodworker, a friend gave him a Chinese name that I do not try to pronounce. It means Healthy Green Forest.



Figure 1: Students work on their projects at the Community Woodworking Studio

"We have to make the future for ourselves" (Ingold, 2013, p. 6).

Some research begins slowly. I had an idea that a thesis had to be exceptional, that it somehow had to go outside my everyday life in order for me to learn from it. In the end, I found a pebble of my everyday being buried so deep that I failed at first to recognize its influence, and I wrote about that. Once unearthed, the pebble shone, witnessed and with it that arcane part of myself, polished by the same grit caught under my fingernails. The most frustrating thing is that anyone reading this will only see one tiny facet of what I have learned.

Some stories escape from an old wooden box. Like the journals I created and studied for my thesis, the box arrived second-hand and I played with it and placed parts of myself inside it so that by the end, it was something new as much as something old. Two years before beginning this thesis, I disappeared into making as I had not done since I was a child and emerged from the box a different version of myself. I wondered if making is also learning, and if the process informs how the maker exists in the world? I wanted to know what it means to get lost in a project (and to come out the other side, a bit dazed), why creative decisions are so difficult to explain, and why the highs of handiwork always seem to outweigh the hang-ups.

My thesis explores how presence in the conversations that surround us – not just as observers but as participants – may help to encourage more ecologically perceptive ways of being. I consider how such conversations can hermeneutically shape materials and makers in turn, build sense of self rooted in authentic activity, and highlight the importance of sensation in going beyond the anthropocentric (Seebohm, 2004). I should explain how I use the term *maker*

in this paper.¹ My definition of maker, at least for the purposes of this research, is a person who works with their hands – and by extension, their bodies – to create something tangible. While the doing itself is vital to how I understand making, the creative, intuitive or imaginative aspect is equally important; the result is a process that leans toward a *workmanship of risk* (as opposed to a *workmanship of certainty*) (Pye, 1968), where the maker is both open and responsive with respect to design through production (Lakind, 2017). Simply put, a maker bodily and mindfully engages in the process of making something material, is willing to play along with unpredictable circumstances and respects each project as unique and inimitable.

Throughout my work I make reference to human and other; by other, I mean anything – living or not – beyond the human body-mind that a maker engages with in the course of making. I argue that learning through making unfolds as an ongoing, emergent conversation between materials and maker, and that this experience is active, authentic, flow-like and joyful (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a). I make this argument by entering into conversation between myself and another maker, and simultaneously between the phenomenology of materials and the phenomenology of self (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Ultimately, I discover that I think too much, analysis serving only to muffle potential insights. Learning cannot be imparted, rather it must be intuited through open conversation between the wild within and without, lived in the liminal space that is the present.

¹ There is already a body of work around making in the context of the maker movement and maker-space that is beyond the scope of this thesis (see: Halverson & Sheridan, 2014; Manzini, 2015).



Figure 2: Box created as a Sense of Place Map, completed July 2017

Designing for movement

Shifting between my own handiwork and a series of semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2013) with a professional woodworker, my exploration of the conversations between materials and self was guided by several complementary methodologies. Given the phenomenological and intuitive nature of the research, my methods were largely emergent as the study progressed.

Handiwork

As a child, I had dreams of being an author and bookmaker, stapling sheets of dot matrix printer paper into small volumes that I would proudly present to my parents, but until beginning this project I had never done any formal bookbinding. In a thrift shop in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, on shelves standing between 1980's coveralls, faded band t-shirts and shrunken wool sweaters, is an eclectic collection of local artworks. One woman, a member of this community, made something that stuck in my head – a journal composed of abandoned diaries, notebooks and agendas, all essentially intact and sewn together with cotton thread. It didn't matter that the pages were different sizes, that the original covers were still attached, or that the calendars were marked and well out-of-date – this was something with a past, ready for a future.

With so much already in circulation, my default when I need anything is to visit a local thrift shop. The danger, of course, is finding interesting things like vintage children's books. A small stack of these combined with preparations to move out of my apartment made bookbinding an ideal research option. I found drawers devoted to hiding half-used notebooks, card stock, sketchbooks, dog-eared printer paper and stained loose-leaf pages. I found an exacto knife, an ice pick, beeswax and thread, and I began to breathe new life into the discarded.

I built eleven journals, each composed of four or five groups of folded pages, called signatures. I was very intentional about compiling the signatures to ensure that they would sit evenly in the journal. In later journals, I differentiated each signature by using distinctive paper on the outside; this was as much to help me remember the binding order as for aesthetics. Six journals still have their original spine and for these, signatures are sewn onto card stock – cut-offs from other projects, pizza or cereal boxes – using a version of pamphlet stitch binding. Due to their size or condition, the other five journals use only the original front and back covers, with

cloth to cover any open edges and Coptic stitch binding² to leave rows of knots visible along the spine of each signature (see Figure 3). Every journal retains pages from the original book. These pages are either intact, cropped to show illustrations or words that I have chosen, or folded into pockets.

Ethics

I worked with one professional woodworker (Jeremy), who, though presented with the option to select a pseudonym, provided verbal permission to use his real name. Over the course of one month I conducted a series of four in-person interviews at the Community Woodworking Studio in North Vancouver, British Columbia. The interviews were semi-structured to encourage open conversation (Brinkmann, 2013; Olsen, 2014) and video-recorded to capture both conversation and context. Between each interview, I reviewed the footage from prior interviews to identify relevant topics for follow-up. Occasionally, I read back excerpts in Jeremy's own words to help spur deeper reflection by creating a self-reflexive focus (Chawla, 2006; Harper, 1987). Where video provided a solid all-around capture of each session, including body language and facial expression, photographs and personal notes were ideal for informal observations.

Upon receiving ethical approval from the Royal Roads Ethics Review Board, I introduced myself to Jeremy initially through email and then followed up in person to confirm his interest in participating. Having reviewed the research plan and the consent form and having been informed that he could opt out of the study at any time, we scheduled the first interview. All

² Coptic binding has been used from as early as the 2nd century AD and is exemplified by signatures linked by chain-like stitching across the spine of the book ("Coptic binding," 2019). I used a video tutorial to learn this binding method (Lemon, 2012).

interview transcripts and recordings were stored on my personal password-protected computer and any physical notes were stored in my home, locked if I were not present.

Given the shared workshop environment, Jeremy introduced me to students as they entered the space; I received written consent from those whose voices would be included in the transcript, and verbal consent from those whose actions were recorded. Though no student did so, had any person refused to provide consent or expressed concern about being recorded I would have selected a different time to hold the interview.

Weaving

Answering the need to follow the parallel flows of experience in both bookbinding and interviews, I drew inspiration from a blend of qualitative methodologies including artisanal ethnography (Vannini & Vannini, 2019) and a/r/tography (Bickel et al., 2011; Irwin, 2013; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004). My research is about making; why should my approach to making ethnography be different from making journals? If in building journals I am following where the materials lead, why should the same process not apply to conducting interviews? The interviews, much like the bookbinding, were largely unscripted – to over-design either would have stifled what might emerge. I was not studying Jeremy but learning through engagement with him and his materials and his surroundings. Vannini and Vannini (2019) argue that ethnography can go beyond the sensory (Pink, 2009) and cross over into the sensuous. In my case, while it would be perfectly possible to create an ethnographic work through the smell of sawdust, the sound of sandpaper and the myriad textures of paper and fabric under my fingers, an artisanal ethnography takes this a step further in generating fodder for the senses. My journals are tangible renderings of myself, my research and my learning; or, as artist, researcher and teacher.

I personally refuse the title of artist; however, my journals are undoubtedly aesthetic expressions of a two-fold research process including elements of self-reflection and ethnographic interviews. *Ar/tography* calls for researchers to make meaning through “perceptual practices” – art-making, conversations – “that reveal what once was hidden, create what has never been known, and imagine what we hope to achieve” (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004, p. 36). This thesis paper itself is my contribution as a teacher, an expression of my learning that I hope will deepen environmental consciousness.

While not a formal methodology, I was also informed by Tim Ingold’s art of inquiry which stresses the idea of following one’s intuition, where “the conduct of thought goes along with, and continually answer to, the fluxes and flows of the materials with which we work” (2013, p. 6). I especially appreciate the hermeneutic and phenomenological qualities of art of inquiry in that, “These materials think in us, as we think through them” (Ingold, 2013, p. 6). I should not have been surprised when my personal experience of circular, bordering on animistic, dialogue between thread, glue, stained fabric and torn pages was echoed in the interviews.

I encountered reading on Intuitive Inquiry only after completing my interviews and personal reflections and was astounded by how closely this methodology described my process in practice. Anderson (2004) mentions that “what a researcher feels ‘called’ to study may be a call from the culture at large for change” (p. 308), a sentiment which mirrors my own feelings on the importance of shifting individual values as the Earth faces a climate crisis. She also notes the importance of being able to think independently and creatively, and stresses a worldview where reality is in motion and is indistinguishable from those living it. Such a worldview is known through intuitive channels including sensory perception, proprioception (inner body senses) and kinesthesia, making it an ideal frame of reference for my research on making and being. Most

importantly, my research acknowledges personal experiences and interpretations in an ever-changing world, and hopefully “encourages new visions of the future and makes them possible” (Anderson, 2004, p. 324).

My study was limited to two voices outside of literature: my own and that of a professional maker whose experiences, skills and situation differed from my own. Accepting the inherent subjectivity of ethnographic work, this choice encouraged depth and recursiveness in my research, echoing a facet of intuitive inquiry that values the researcher’s unique experience and interpretations (Anderson, 2004). As expected, my research developed rhizomatically (Amorim & Ryan, 2005), but I stepped back periodically to see the larger shape of my work, part of a process Anderson (2004) calls *iterative cycles of interpretation* including periodic checks to review and revise the lenses through which one is working. Using notes and quotes from every part of the interviews and my personal journal, I fashioned a large paper mind-map that I could physically manipulate. This helped me to identify which original lenses, themes and avenues of inquiry were still valid, which ideas corresponded (or not) with my own experience, and new lenses through which to continue my research.

While the details of my methods were specific to me, in practice it is entirely possible for another researcher to follow a similar route of inquiry by conducting a series of consecutive, in-depth interviews and by pursuing a personal project involving handiwork or art-making that speaks to the researcher. In my case, it was also important that the materials be up-cycled wherever possible and I believe this should continue to be a conscious part of any direct follow up to this study that employs similar methods.



Figure 3: Example of Coptic stitch binding

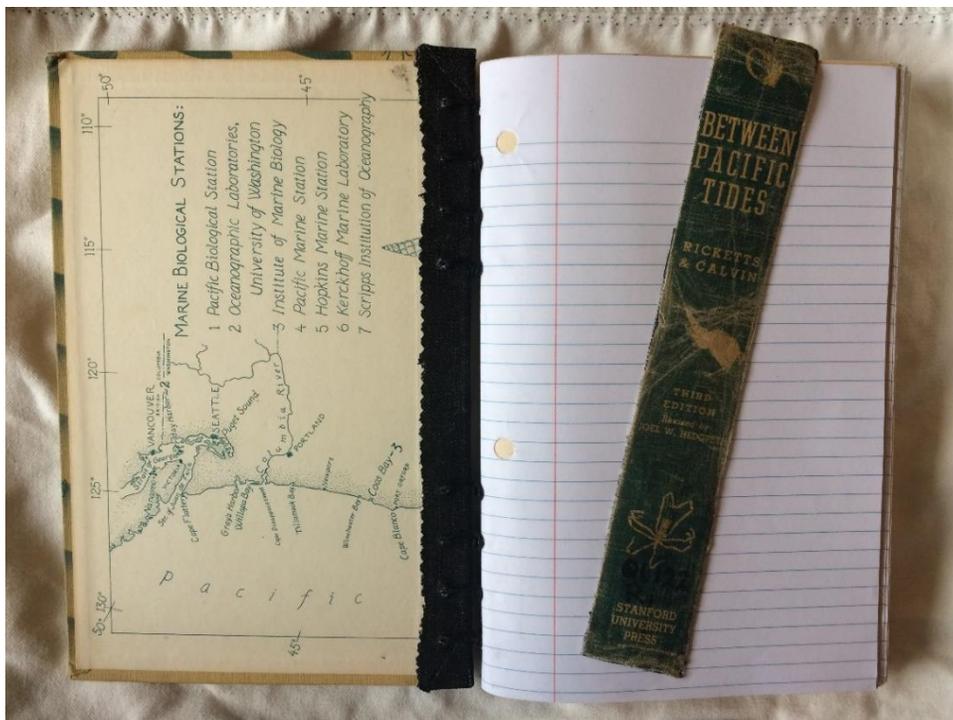


Figure 4: Bookmark created from the spine of an old book, reinforced with fabric

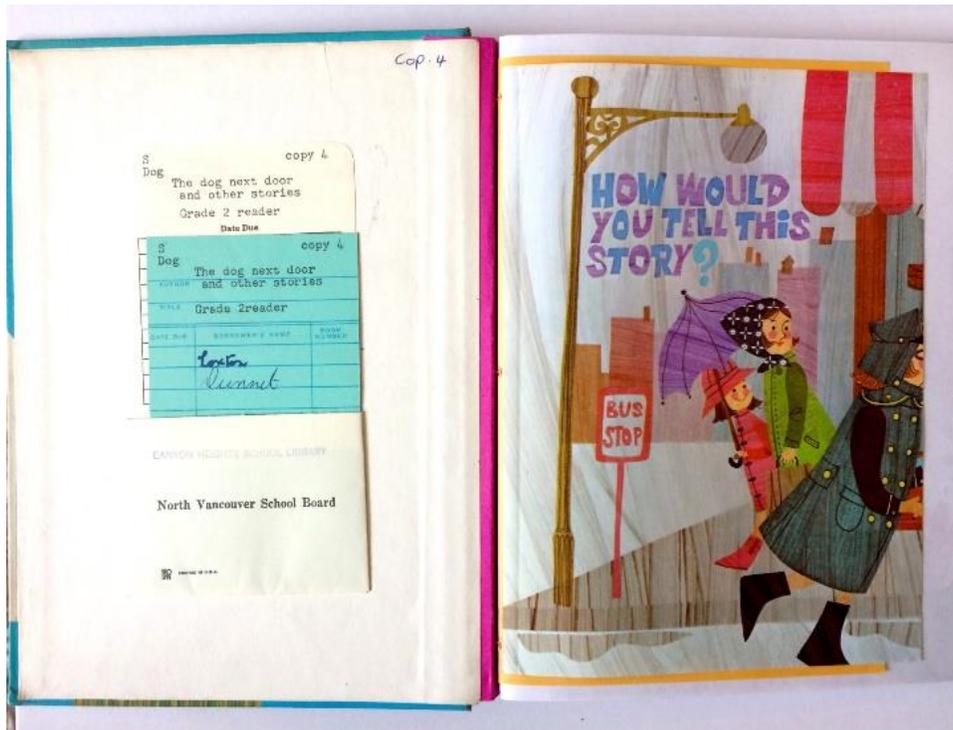


Figure 5: Example of saved images and library card, preserving original character



Figure 6: Example of off-cut paper and inspiring saved image

Making and being

Conversation

Jeremy sits down for long enough to tell me a story. Mighty Oak fell during a storm and was named when a Japanese craftsman eventually milled the fallen tree. For years, the craftsman wondered what he should do with Mighty Oak, but he waited to know what to make. When visiting his studio from Japan, his mother noted the shabbiness of his doors and told him to make some beautiful ones instead, meaning some shoji-style doors that would nicely diffuse the light. To honour his mother, the first thing the craftsman made of the tree was a new set of doors. To honour Mighty Oak, the doors were heavy and strong, with grain that would show in the light.

As he speaks, I think that I am not a great craftsman, but that I, too, waited to know what to make of the materials I had. The idea, when it came, could not have been anything else given the journey I was beginning. To honour both this transition and the books themselves, I made a set of journals to hold my learning through the messy in-between.

The important thing in art of inquiry, according to Ingold (2013), is that we need such a perspective “in order not to accumulate more and more information *about* the world, but to better correspond with it” (p. 7). Where Ingold chooses to use *correspond*, I prefer *converse* for the visual of turning together as within the barrel of a wave or as on a shared planetary orbit, but our essential meaning is the same. Through conversations with the world and the materials thereof, making is conducted by one’s environment as much as by one’s own hands. Hands, of course, representing at once the entire body and the physicality of making (Shiner, 2012, p. 234). Things that are made, along with makers themselves, are constantly engaged in a reciprocal conversation that shapes each of them in a hermeneutic spiral. Per Shamas and Maker (2018), “both creative processes and learning processes are cyclical in nature. To learn or to do, one must be able to

unlearn and undo. Thoughts give way to sensations, which in turn give way to new thoughts” (pp. 132-133). An epistemology of making is a two-way conversation; it is impossible to learn anything by shouting in ignorance of one’s actions in context.

Just as this is true in human-to-human dialogue, so the same alertness and openness is vital in every other worldly interaction. A woodworker must be open to the ‘voices’ of the wood to any productive results. Thus, engaging in conversation via making, “turns into an act of waiting, listening, collaboration and dialogue [in which] one gradually learns the skill of co-operating with one’s own work” (Pallasmaa, 2009, p. 111). In this light, a finished product and an expression of identity are only snapshots of this “dance of animacy” (Ingold, 2013, p. 101). Collaboration with the other – in this case with materials – becomes collaboration with self. Conversation in this context is neither a description nor a representation of the world, but an active *answer to it* (Ingold, 2013):

it is to mix the movements of one’s own sentient awareness with the flows and currents of animate life. Such mixture, where sentience and materials twine around one another on their double thread until – like lovers’ eye-beams – they become indistinguishable, is of the essence of making (p. 108).

So pay attention. Listen with ears and fingertips and respond accordingly.

If making itself is a conversation, then it follows that presence is required to participate. Abram (1997) notes that bodies must be “woven into the present” (p. 50), compelling an openness to accept current shapes as they are and to build each moment, each action, from the last. The idea of being receptive and responsive in one’s engagement with the world is key. However universal Abram intended to be, in the context of making, his words can be taken quite literally. It is one thing to consider a conversation with a living thing, an animal, a plant or even a

stream, but quite another to imagine holding a heart-to-heart with a rock, a book or a piece of metal. Abram's strong ideas on animism requires one to step outside an anthropocentric perspective and remember that the meat of bodies by which one senses and evaluates, is made up of the same elements as everything else (Nhat Hanh, 1993).

Why, then, should there exist such a disconnect between not only the human and non-human, but the animate and inanimate? Hillman (1989) also speaks of a "world ensouled" (p. 2) and one's ability to animate the world through imagination, recognizing the shapes as they present themselves. Though he acknowledges that it is one's perception that animates them, to Hillman, recognition of soul occurs through belief in the characters, voices and regard of objects expressed via sensation. In his view, the world's soul cannot be understood by rational, scientific analysis; rather, one must "remember the world's body so that we can [...] relate to it as person to person" (Hillman, 1989, p. 1). Just because something is imaginary does not mean it is not real. The fact is that human relations exist only in the larger context of ecological relations and this sentient ecology (Ingold, 2002) must, in the most literal sense of the word, incorporate active conversation with both human and non-human beings.

If I touch a pile of old paper and a broken book, I can perceive their voices, but this way of thinking – of imagining a world that can call back – is what leads me to turn these materials into something else and in so acting, to recall a facet of my humanity. As Abram (1997) summarizes, "To shut ourselves off from these other voices [...] is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human" (p. 22). In refusing to converse with the non-human world, humanity rejects the ecological reality of which it is a part. Like Abram and Hillman, Ingold (2002) argues that humans exist in a world shared with not only other humans, but non-humans

as well; in this light, human relations are in fact also ecological relations: “With all the data at our fingertips, we think we know what can be known; yet knowing all, we fail to see or take counsel from the world itself” (Ingold, 2013, p. 6). It follows that legitimating the phenomenal non-human as through conversation with materials may help us to participate as part of a broader ecological system.

These conversations have power to return the world to soul through “world-soul to human-soul” conversation (Leighton, 2014, p. 65) and the process of making provides an ideal opportunity to engage in such dialogue through conscious manipulation of materials; after all, “it is through actually engaging in the activities and environments we wish to learn about that we come to know them” (Pink, 2009, p. 70). Respect for the other is fundamental to learning through dialogue, regardless of with whom – or what – one is conversing. It is this same respect that builds lasting relationships between, say, a planet and its human inhabitants.

The craftsman in the story of Mighty Oak possesses a sensitivity and awareness of the tree as a unique being. According to Jeremy, many makers approach design in a similar way: “You don’t just butcher the wood into a form, but you let it come out in the way that it is”. The term *wood butcher* describes the difference between *working with* and *working on*. A wood butcher is a weekend warrior of woodworking, an unsophisticated hobbyist who enjoys “beating up on cellulose,” but as Jeremy points out, “to get the best out of it you have to work with it.” He means that for the sake of honourable craftsmanship, one must listen to what the wood is saying. This is not about visible grain or live edges, but rather minimizing waste while making something as beautiful as possible given its situational context (see: Vannini & Vannini, 2019). Being inspired by natural or human-made forms is a big part of design, but honouring these forms is crucial. Looking back, this is precisely what informed my own making. One may take

the idea of palimpsest (Lexico, n.d.) – something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form – one step further to say that in reusing or altering honourably, one is beholden to retain not only visible vestiges of the original, but also some of the spirit that informed the design in the first place.

Expression

Jeremy says he is just a woodworker. He and I were both surprised to learn that *woodworker* is not a profession according to the Canada Revenue Agency; they eventually settled on Master Joiner to describe Jeremy's work. "I'd never thought about it that way before!" he exclaims. "So according to the CRA I'm a Master Joiner, but as far as I'm concerned, I'm just a craftsman or a maker. I'm an artisan, too." He shrugs. "Artist? I don't think so. I could be, I maybe am, but not that I live by it. I'm not only making things to express certain things or ways or whatever. I try and make functional stuff." Jeremy pauses for a moment before continuing. "To me, the connotation of the craftsman is someone who lives in lifelong learning and who is extremely sophisticated in his craft. Artisan may be the person on the way to that. You might say a maker is someone who's starting. But it's semantics. As far as I'm concerned, if everyone was a maker, that's good," he says, nodding emphatically.³

I go home and pick up a cookbook from the 1930's covered in brown mold and blue handwriting, evidence of women – presumably – who made the most of their kitchens. Between recipes, the illustrations are detailed and fabulous, mini main d'œuvres depicting delicious hors d'œuvres. As I start to cut the cover from the signatures, I consider that I would not call myself

³ My focus here is not on the difference between craft and art, or craftsman and artist, but it is a discussion worth exploring in the context of purpose and skill in making (see: Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2010; Risatti, 2007; Shiner, 2012).

an artist either. I look at the pile of journals I've already finished. There's an element of expression, surely, in that I chose the design, material and method for each, but my intent is not exclusively aesthetics; rather, it is to create something useful out of material most would call waste. The mix of odd cuts in each signature and the clash of colour schemes are not artistic, but a result of using what I have on my table to the best of my ability.

The first task Jeremy often sets for his students is to carve a spoon. This sounds simple, but it is an exercise in form disguised as one in function, intended to introduce his students to a new material and to quash any notions of control they might have. The project is inherently morphogenetic, where form is emergent, as much as it seems hylomorphic where form is imposed by sheer will (Ingold, 2013). "Form," says Jeremy, "is arguing at all times with the grain, with the wood." If spoon carving were purely a functional task, each student could apply a template and fashion identical utensils, each able to measure, stir and serve equal portions. This is never the case. Each spoon inherently contains a soupçon of self-expression from the individual engaging with their unique piece of wood.

Jeremy admits that he does not see a clear division of where art is and where it is not; however, in the context of making it does not actually matter. According to Lakind (2017), "artists do not impose upon the material, rather interact with form and matter [Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012; Ingold, 2013]" (p. 11) and as I have already argued, the same statement is true of makers. Konrad Sauer, whom Jeremy references as "the most skilled craftsman in the entire world," makes hand planes. Like Jeremy and like me, Konrad does not consider himself an artist. It comes down to the adage that if something is worth doing, it is worth doing well. Jeremy cites the following example: "Did Michelangelo take on what he did because he was going to get paid by the Pope? Yes, he did, he was commissioned by the pope, alright. Would he have done it

better because he was commissioned by the Pope? Not at all!” In this example, Michelangelo had chosen blocks marble well before his commissions materialized. Regardless of what would eventually be made or where it would end up, there was first an appreciation for the material, which blocks of marble had the potential to convey form.

Jeremy insists that he does not make to express himself artistically: “I’m making what I feel, what I like, when I feel something that’s nice or good or beautiful, but it isn’t art. Expression in art can be something totally different. [...] I’m not trying to change people’s thinking, I’m just trying to show what I like, show what’s in my head.” Perhaps it does not need to be the product that sparks change, but that the product exists at all. Or, put another way, the process of making the product – and not the product itself – is maybe what can change people’s thinking. I have already established the potential for conversation with materials to shape new versions of oneself, so it follows that as a teacher of making Jeremy has the capacity to incite similar change in others via their own self-expression.

Design, he says, is an “extension of yourself” and as such, “it makes what you produce have meaning to you.” When one shows what one has created, one shows a part of oneself. Inasmuch, it is a moral dilemma for Jeremy to be asked to make something he considers hideous, “because it carries me – I go with it, so I’ve got to make something that fits who I am.” The process of expression through making engages one in tacit conversation about one’s true self; the deeper the feeling of trueness, the more authentic the experience (Vannini & Williams, 2009). Jeremy’s pursuit of “an honest life” is in some way a quest for authenticity. His classes often start with a discussion on collective design aesthetic, or acceptance of form, which can get in the way of these self-reflexive conversations. Minimalism, he says, is one example of this kind of cultural groupthink:

Is exuberance not merely a different form of personal expression? If you feel that this form, and this colour and these shapes are what you want to do and it's voluptuous and it's exuberant and it's colourful and grand [waves hands], is it old-fashioned? Is it traditional? No. It's just different. [...] Oh I wish minimalism would be killed. I wish it would because it limits us to say *I think I'd like this*. Why not? Go for it! *Nah it doesn't really fit*. What do you mean it doesn't fit? Doesn't fit what? It doesn't fit what someone else thinks.

Playing with form is a duet of expression between makers and materials, each making themselves heard and understood to one another as countermelodies. This understanding is manifest through praxis, where in engaging bodily, mindfully and creatively with materials, new aspects of self are presented for consideration through expression. In this way, one not only learns about but actively develops one's sense of self in relation to one's environment. Such tandem learning, however, requires a depth of skill, concentration and involvement exemplified by Csikszentmihalyi's (1997b) notion of *flow*.

Flow

Jeremy puts Konrad's plane down on the table, where we both stare for a moment. I tell him it's been twenty years since I last touched one and he becomes the interviewer, asking me if I remember some of my first thoughts using a hand plane. I remember it was heavy in my slender hands but seemed weightless as it glided; it must have been sharp. Jeremy disappears for a moment and returns carrying a vibrant red board, about a foot long, six inches wide and one inch thick. "This is Chakte Kok, or Redheart." I can't believe how bright it is, stained like the site of a ripe cherry massacre. He tests and adjusts the plane, shows me how to hold it and where to put

my weight as I push across the board. I try shaving after shaving. It takes me a long time to get one that feels right.

It's the same feeling I have running an exacto knife across an illustration page. The colour images of chitons are on photographic paper, thick and glossy compared to the soft, worn fibers of the rest of the book, so I have to adjust the weight to ensure a clean cut. I can hear the difference as the knife slides, and I change the angle of the blade against the straight edge in my other hand – it's smooth as soon as I hit the correct angle. I do this again and again to find the right groove for each page.

The next time we meet, Jeremy discusses the experiential differences between using hand tools versus a CNC machine. To illustrate, he dramatizes his plane lesson with me: “You know, I realize now that I actually have to focus! And I've got this piece of wood in this thing here,” Jeremy hops off the stool, grabs the nearest piece of wood and quickly clamps it in a vice. “I have to focus, because why must I focus? Well, what I'm noticing is each time I push it across here – Jeremy tells me I must push, but I never get a full shaving, he always gets full shavings! I have to really think about this, I have to move my body so that I can get consistency in the size of the shaving.” He turns his eyes back to me and continues, “It's not a matter of just doing the action, it's more than that. And now I realize it's not so easy, oh but then I love it. It's so much fun and now I really want to get into it, so now I realize okay, when I start focusing, I realize I switch off because I'm so focused.” He stares off into space, looks dazed for a moment, then blinks. He picks up his phone to check the time. “Oh, my goodness, it's been two hours, time just went! You know, it's like... this is... now I just feel totally different.” Facing me with wide eyes, he gestures matter-of-factly and says, “This is the kind of experience I get people telling me about all the time.”

He is animated as he mimics the lesson, showing just how overwhelming and even intoxicating this aspect of making can be. Any person engaging deeply in a body-mind activity, like playing an instrument, kneading bread or woodworking, can experience a state of what Csikszentmihalyi (1997b) calls *flow*, “an almost effortless yet highly focused state of consciousness” (p. 9). Flow involves an immediate presence and attention moment-to-moment, something Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi (2012) have named *attentional involvement*. High attentional involvement and flow are linked to several common qualities of experience exemplified in Jeremy’s reenactment, including enjoyment, misplaced time, blurred action and awareness, losing oneself in the activity, immediate feedback to one’s actions, obliviousness to distractions, no worry of failure, and finally, the activity becoming an end in itself (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997b). Learning through making requires practical – not only theoretical – engagement: “You don’t switch off when you think about it. You switch off when you do it,” says Jeremy.

Flow experiences are relative and personal, meaning that they are not the same for everybody. Nevertheless, it was fascinating to hear so many of my own stories echoed in Jeremy’s words. I rarely notice when I enter flow, I find myself returning after either minutes or hours, and from what I understand from others around me it can be very difficult to get through to me during these spells. Depending on the length and depth of the involvement, it is very much as Jeremy illustrated, like coming out of a daze; I would even describe some of my personal experiences as disorienting. The intensity of flow events can range anywhere from a softened sense of self versus other, all the way to a “profoundly mystical sense of union with the cosmos” (Bai, Cohen, Miyakawa, & Falkenberg, 2018, p. 20), something closer to a peak experience (see: Dennis & Powers, 1974; Maslow, 1964). In the context of making and being, “it’s the actual

doing, it's the involvement"; it is more important to jump into the water than to worry about whether one will end up in a puddle or an ocean.

Flow necessarily involves a level of embodiment, what Harper (1987, p. 20) calls "living intelligence" (p. 20); *living* manifest as the body's action in flow, and *intelligence* as a result of ongoing attention. Learning through a combination of action and attention is the very process of living in this liminal space, of engaging in emergent conversation on the boundaries of past/future, of skill/challenge, and of material/self. Ingold (2013) provides a refreshing perspective on the "anti-disciplinary" (p. 12) nature of learning by noting that how one learns can change how one thinks, "*through* observation rather than *after* it" (Ingold, 2013, p. 11, original emphasis). Just as one thinks through observation, one thinks through action, as in kinesthesia, or "thinking in movement" (Ingold, 2013, p. 98). What can a mind by itself do with a hand plane, or a sewing needle? A mind does not act; it cannot without both materials to sense and a body with which to sense them. Espe-Brown (2018) highlights the body-mind connection: "More than a third of the motor neurons from your brain to your body go to your hands and more than a third of the sensory neurons from your body are from your hands." A body is not a boundary, not a wall. It is a threshold, an invitation to sensory experience; "Far from restricting my access to things and to the world, the body is my very means of entering into relation with all things" (Abram, 1997, p. 47). Traversing this threshold and entering into relation with the other guides one toward understanding the shape of the world; this is the kind of learning based on sentient ecology.

All that to say that bodies, wildly sensitive, soul-bearing physical figures that they are, interface with everything that one encounters. "Learning is not a unidirectional process, nor does it originate in the mind"; rather, learning and making together are "ontological, intuitive

experiences” (Lakind, 2017, p. 12). The answer to the question of how learning through making translates into ways of being is naturally found in praxis, on the borders of body-action and mind-awareness.

Jeremy asks me to remember my first few shavings with the hand plane. It took several runs to get the feel for it, a phenomenon he calls “reality feedback.” This is where he draws the distinction between *authentic* and *non-authentic* experiences. It is perfectly possible to download a silhouette image of a goose and create a wooden version of that image: a computer program controls a cutter which can make one goose or even a whole flock. Jeremy flings his arms open in exasperation: “How much reward am I getting out of this? How much feeling, how much feedback am I getting? How much mindfulness is there in this process?” In relation to making, this is what Jeremy would term *non-authentic*, versus *authentic* activity where body movement and brain work together to create a feeling of *getting it*. In Jeremy’s view, this experience can be achieved through any number of activities: “If [my students] went on to pottery, I’d be quite happy,” says the woodworker, because “it’s not only virtual, it’s not only academic. It’s life in action.” The phrase *doing authenticity* (Vannini & Franzese, 2008) is an excellent representation of this kind of learning through authentic activity, where self is developed through physical performance. However bewildering the process, a new version of oneself will emerge through the chaos.

Experiential learning requires that a whole person – body and mind – be engaged in cycles of action, reflection, experience and abstraction (Kolb & Kolb, 2012). Echoing Csikszentmihalyi’s description of flow experiences where the activity becomes an end in itself, Leighton (2014) notes that, “by its very nature, active experiential learning, i.e. learning by doing and ‘becoming’ at the same time, *is* both the curriculum and the outcome in and of itself despite

the unfinishedness that ‘becoming’ always is” (p. 4, original emphasis). Living in and working through liminal space is part of learning. Like the wooden goose, the virtual world does not – at least, not yet – deliver the type of reality feedback that constitutes an authentic learning experience.

Joy

Jeremy is uncharacteristically quiet as he watches me run the plane over the Redheart, commenting only to correct me – my shoulders are too far over the board. I can feel the difference in each pass and I don’t want to stop. Just one more, I tell myself, aware that I’m supposed to be interviewing, not woodworking. The next one curls nicely, and a long scarlet ringlet joins the growing pile of broken flakes on the ground. The wood melted for me then, this feels so good. One more. Jeremy hears me murmur and smiles, at me or at his own memories, I’m not sure because he looks away still smiling. I take this as permission to keep going. One more.

“See, it’s interesting,” he says as I work, “someone takes a plane, they don’t want to just stop after one shaving. There’s something about it, I don’t know what it is, but there’s a joy in doing something manually. There’s the sound, there’s the feel,” he shrugs, “and when you get it right, you feel good! You don’t feel like, oh now I need to go to sleep, or oh I’ve got a headache, no! All that goes away. Let’s say the boss yelled at you today, but then you get this right, you’re not thinking about your boss. It’s all good.” I look up and put the plane down. He continues, “So if people are just doing something small, really small, doing stuff, real stuff, basically it’s authentic activity. There’s nothing artificial about it. There’s nothing inflated. There’s no overpromising and underdelivering. It’s all just genuine.” He pauses before adding, “I think you can get that from pottery, I think you can get that from sewing.”

My body remembers the feel of the plane as I test the tension of each Coptic stitch knot. I flex the front cover, revealing an illustration of Terry and her caterpillars. The flex feels right, so I tie another knot. One more. I smile, whether at myself or my memories, I'm not sure.

In flow, one lives in what I have called liminal space – what Bridges (1991) calls transitional space – to work with something that is not quite itself yet. Living in liminal space means relinquishing control and tuning in to receive feedback. How hard do I push the hand plane to get a nice shaving? Out of around twenty passes, I succeed in making two or three smooth curls. “Doing all this makes me realize how I can still make mistakes, I’m not as good as I thought I was,” Jeremy explains, “It stops being all about you.” Failure is unavoidable in making, and yet makers lost in flow are not unhappy. They enjoy a *workmanship of risk*, an “open-ended process responsive to influences of engagement and uncertainty” (Lakind, 2017, p. 18). In contrast to superficial, purposeless or passive pleasures which are at best relaxing and at worst distracting, enjoyment can be stressful or even unpleasant, and it is enjoyment that provides the “foundation for memories that, in retrospect, enrich lives and give confidence for facing the future” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004, p. 9). Enjoyment through conversation has the capacity to shape not only materials and makers, but their futures as well.

As Jeremy puts it, the lessons learned in making force a person to recognize their failures by understanding that one “can’t just shove it and push it and make it do what [they] want it to do.” A curious aspect of flow experiences, as already noted, is that one is so absorbed in the body-mind activity that one essentially forgets to fail. One pushes and is pushed back on in a hermeneutic cycle of doing and undergoing. In the absence of negative feelings such as fear of failure, the neuroplastic effects of such activity holds the potential for self-actualization. “Paradoxically,” say Abuhamdeh and Csikszentmihalyi (2012), “the self expands through acts of

self-forgetfulness” (p. 11). Making can be extremely frustrating and for many involves stepping out of one’s comfort zone, but the boost in confidence and self-reliance is considerable.

Conversations in making go beyond basic interactions between material and self, “there is an act of re-creation within the self that also occurs”; furthermore, this development is a result of what Jeremy calls *life in action*, of “the continuous readjustment of self and the world in experience” (Dennis & Powers, 1974, p. 55; Dewey, 1934). Conversations like those held in making are powerful.

The spoon carving exercise is designed to teach students how to work *with* the material. Jeremy insists that he wants “people to enjoy working with their hands and creating things and not giving up, because it is hard.” Concerning some students, he describes the phenomenon of holding back and punching through. It is not a question of intelligence, “they know how to think, but they’re too scared to think.” I believe that part of Jeremy’s goal is to increase comfort inside liminal space through making. “The funny thing is,” he says, “the moment they get something right their confidence level goes sky high, through the roof, and you watch the smile happen, and you watch their shoulders relax, and the frown goes away.” For this reason, he compares his workshop to a spa, a retreat from the noise, pressure and inauthenticity of the unreal world.

Jeremy promises me that someone who has a lower skill level will still enjoy the same experience; inasmuch, I argue that the challenge of the work must be proportional to the level of skill. Enjoyment of an experience is weighed on a balance between skill and challenge; if perceived challenge exceeds perceived skill, one may become anxious, but if skill exceeds challenge, one risks becoming bored (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012). I lean in to look more closely at the small block of wood in Jeremy’s hands, which is actually two blocks fused by the most delicate dovetail join I have ever seen (Figure 7). He tells me that if he could have, he

would have made it even finer. This bothers him; the challenge is always there, and he feels compelled to level up his skill to match.



Figure 7: Extremely fine dovetail joint, created and held by Jeremy

In addition to challenge and skill, attention is key to enjoyment. While making can be very difficult and failure is inevitable, achieving flow in making offers not only a safe space in which to fail – and therefore a safe space in which to learn – but actually inspires one to keep learning. In a kind of magical misdirection, attentional involvement enhances enjoyment by “directing attention AWAY from self-related thoughts and concerns” (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012, p. 264, original emphasis). Objective assessments of good or bad mean nothing in flow, where things are simply what they are, as they are in the moment. This transcension of objective reality, where the common catchphrase *no worries* comes true, is bliss (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Such a phenomenological blend is its own kind of high.

I know a clean shaving as I run the plane over the wood. I feel the rough paper, soft cloth and waxed thread more intensely when they come together in my fingers. One of Jeremy’s class

projects, a side table, took the fastest person eleven weeks and the slowest person thirty-five weeks to complete. The person who took thirty-five weeks was not depressed that he took so long; rather he took that time, “knowingly, willingly [...] because it was just fun doing it.” Time spent making provides personal purpose and focus. Jeremy hits the workbench loudly with an open palm, revealing the passion behind his teaching and his belief in the difference that woodworking can make, and has made, in the lives of his students, who “took away an understanding of themselves. They took away a way to approach their life differently.” Vannini and Williams (2009) capture this idea, saying, “When we feel beauty, especially the beauty of something we have created, we feel a sense of connectedness with the world, like a melody and a harmony (cf. Vannini and Waskul, 2006), and we seek more of it” (p. 110). The expression *feel beauty* is especially apt given the tactile, action-driven aspects so fundamental in making.

One word that may be used to describe this phenomenological process is *enchantment*. Disenchantment, humanity’s perceived disassociation from the phenomenal world, has not only had a profoundly devastating effect on humans themselves, but on the entire planet (Berman, 1981). Often, truth based solely on scientific rationality disassembles the world into pieces so tiny as to destroy any semblance of reality, and in the process, alienates one from oneself (Ingold, 2013). Hardly surprising that everyday encounters seem so difficult when nothing is perceived as truly familiar. An enchanted world is one of open communication and imagination, where perception is real and action is meaningful (Berman, 1981). In that sense, it is an authentic world. Making encourages one to reenchant the world by engaging bodily, mindfully, and authentically with both self and materials.

Conclusion

“The learner approaches learning in the exact same way that the creator approaches the creative process. Both are entering the realm of the unknown, at least from their perspective, which is the only one that matters” (Shamas & Maker, 2018, p. 132).

One of the most memorable moments of my research was hearing Jeremy articulate my own personal feelings and experiences around *life in action*. It was equally surprising to find different academics repeating the same ideas: Csikszentmihalyi (1996) calls it “full-blast living” (p. 36), and Ingold (2013) “intuition in action” where “artisans or practitioners who follow the flow are, in effect, itinerants, wayfarers, whose task is to enter the grain of the world’s becoming and bend it to an evolving purpose” (p. 25). Poetically hopeful, he hints that those who work in flow, like makers, may not only imagine, but generate new futures.

“What is it about making with your hands? What makes you want to keep doing it?” I ask Jeremy. His response is immediate and definite. “I want people to work with their hands because I believe it makes for a healthier community, for a healthier population. I want people to be involved in a practical manner with some material. And I would like people to be more thoughtful or mindful about creating things with a purpose.” He talks about the therapeutic value of hands-on work. He talks about self-actualization and fulfillment. There is ecological possibility in flow.

The potential in authentic activity is alive; it involves an evolution of self through attentional, intentional and directional movement. Imagine shaping one’s work, as a designer, as an educator, as a communicator as a fluid participant in the conversations occurring between animate and inanimate realms. It is one thing to know, logically, the reciprocal effects between

one and one's environment, but it is another to feel, bodily, as these effects are produced and to respond in kind. I argue that the implications of authentic activity are profound, and that they include recognition of self in relation to other, awareness of the effects of one's actions and a sense of joy and empowerment through flow. In the context of environmental education and communication, any engagement that emphasizes a worldview beyond the anthropocentric and promotes presence, mindfulness and creativity is crucial to consciously building a more ecologically connected future.

Jeremy believes that change is not made by masses. Despite the frustration he obviously feels, he seems hopeful about his role as a woodworker, saying, "I can't affect a lot of people, but I can affect one person at a time." He shrugs and gives a serious sort of grin. *Everyone* is made up entirely of *I alones* (Kohák, 2000). To a maker, failure means that there is still something to learn every day; Jeremy's relationship with his students and his community of practice relies on honest listening and open acceptance that there exists much more than oneself. The journey through liminal space may be uncomfortable, but makers like Jeremy see value in taking the time to dwell in the in-between. He leads his students through this art of inquiry because he believes in the positive change that individuals can make. I have experienced this in my own life, and as an educator, I imagine sharing my learning with others. I understand that not every person will derive the same lesson as I did, or as Jeremy did, but the thought that drawing on our experiences may lead them to a deeper relationship with themselves and others is exciting.

What Jeremy practices by making – what he alternately calls quiet, passive or gentle anarchy – invites individuals to engage in authentic body-mind activity and to thereby challenge previously held beliefs about themselves and the world around them. Recycling books into usable journals, paying attention to the discarded, was my contribution to quiet anarchy. Through

kinesthetic work – like woodworking, like bookbinding – it is possible to reconnect with oneself and with one’s community (human and non-human alike). Perceptions can shift through authentic action in flow, and while enlightenment is not guaranteed, making provides a conduit to open flow experiences with the power to animate one’s material environment.

From a state of flow comes comfort in liminal space where, joyfully, one is allowed to express new renderings of both materials and self. Ongoing and emergent, these help to shape the present and beyond, for “What value lies in transformations of the self if they end there, if selves do not go on reciprocally to transform others and the world?” (Ingold, 2013, p. 13). Just as making is a hermeneutic spiral that shapes maker and materials, so being shapes self and others. In this way, making and being are inseparable and together can form new futures. Given what I have learned, I am called as an environmental educator to invite others to jump into the flow and see what truth they find there. I encourage makers, educators and communicators to engage in authentic activity and to create spaces where it is safe to be lost, to fail and to explore. Arts education is a way of teaching, not a what is taught, and as pedagogy it promises through facilitation of “comfortable risk taking” to create “personally meaningful and constructive responses to the world” (Lakind, 2017, p. 19). I invite learning experiences that engage both bodies and minds toward a generative goal and that support learners as they express themselves, navigating the messy in-between.

The little pebble of being is brighter than ever, buffed over years immersed in flow. Now that I understand, at least to some extent, its effect on how I move through the world I am inspired to get lost in what my hands are doing and to listen for the next step. The best part is not knowing exactly how it will all come together but engaging honestly in a conversation much

bigger than myself; folding paper and sanding wood are very small acts, but powerful ones once embodied. One more. Then another. I look at Jeremy and smile.

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