

Question 2:

**Define skill in the context of your own practice and the work of 2
designers/makers/artists from the lecture series**

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This essay is an exploration into what defines skill, specifically that of illustrators and ceramicists, inquiring within their work about what function is and the balance between purposeful and passive consumption of art. I will explore personal narrative and how that is conveyed to a viewer as well as skills that improve and artists' abilities to share a message with an audience. I will also be touching on the history of ceramics and equipment developed by earlier civilizations and how these came into existence through a need for development or a simple want/desire for a different outcome.

Craftsmanship started as a need for tools to improve quality of life for early man. Early humans used their ever-evolving hand and intellect to create objects that could help them complete tasks more efficiently. The way that humans created objects is ever evolving and changing simply for the reason that creating objects stimulated the human brain through problem solving.

Doing something over and over is stimulating when organized as looking ahead. The substance of the routine may change, metamorphose, improve; but the emotional payoff is one's experience of doing it again.- we all know it; it is a rhythm. Built into the contractions of the human heart, the skilled Craftsman has extended rhythm to the hand and the eye." (Sennett, 2008, p.175)

To analyze the meaning of skill we must first look at the official definition. Cambridge dictionary states that skill is an ability to do an activity or job well, especially because you have practiced it, (Cambridge dictionary). Other definitions of skill more specifically focus on how skill is used in a functional way that is more easily utilized in a capitalist society, for example, in a job or a workplace. Artists' skill is more from the heart and is more loosely linked to

functionality as it is perceived by non-artists. An artists purpose is to be skilled at self-expression through creating, which is often not appreciated by those who are not knowledgeable or interested in the arts.

Technique has a bad name; it can be soulless. That's not how people whose hands become highly trained view technique. For them technique will be intimately linked to expression. (Sennett, 2008, p. 149)

Here we are exploring the concept of passive skill: doing something well because that is what we have been conditioned to do. As humans, we do not purposefully approach tasks and activities trying to do badly at them, instead we use our passive learning to actively increase the skill we are improving. Craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake (Sennett, 2008, p.9), for example a lawyer may be skilled at their job by simply regurgitating information that has been engrained into them through repetition. It is argued that this kind of skill is soulless as it is learnt by the book, with a certain right or wrong. However the artists hands that are skilled learns to create through personal exploration, allowing them to discover not only the skills needed to complete a given task but also to develop personal technique and apply skill in ways that are unconventional to the onlooker.

When discussing ceramics ,and the history behind it, we can see that development of skill and technique are not synonymous with a need for efficiency. Sometimes we reading about the development of human culture and society, too much focus is put onto why we expedited many tasks and what purpose the development of machines and equipment used in craft has. We do not consider that sometimes equipment develops regardless of a need, but instead a want, even if there is an easier and more efficient way.

We want to draw the inference that they just knew what they were doing because it serves as a caution against the “just-so” stories that afflict accounts of technology. The just-so account supposes that change has to happen in just a certain way, each step leading implacably to the next; the maker could do and think no other. (Sennett, 2008, p.122)

An example of this could be the invention of the potters wheel. The technique of coil building pots came before the wheel and is efficient and works just as well as a potters wheels. However, artists desired a different finish so invented the wheel to create this desired smooth effect with the clay. Coiling pots was faster and there was no need for a different technique. This piece of equipment was not born out of necessity but out of desire for play with the materials and discover something new.

“...for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the ‘well’ is thought to reside in the function”. (Aristotle, libretext, 2021)

Exploring the theory of object function is a highly debated topic amongst philosophers through the ages, with both Aristotle and Descartes discussing these topics and having opposing views. First we must examine what functionality means, The notion of a function applies naturally to artefacts: the function of a knife is to cut, of a printer to print, and so on. And Aristotle makes free use of the notion here, adding that a feature conducive to good function is a virtue e.g. sharpness is a virtue in a knife. A ‘proper’ function is one peculiar to or characteristic of an object. A knife, for instance, could

function as a poker or screwdriver, but cutting is its proper function. (Skinner, 2015).

In the craft/illustration practice physical and non-physical design often meet and can create great contrast between function and non-function. Illustration is non physical as it is often not a three dimensional object that you can hold, however this is not to say that it is non-functional, as two dimensional drawings can be non-functional for simple aesthetic reasons but can also have the important function of conveying a story or event that was not able to be captured any other way. For example, a painting of The battle of Hastings depicts a real life event to those that were not there so that we can visualize what happened, this serves a function; to teach history and visualize it for the modern viewer. A physical object, for example a mug, is a vessel that holds liquid or other objects; this is its function. This concept is widely understood amongst the general public without much further thought, however, what happens if a physical or non-physical object is non-functional? This is where the popular debate on modern art comes in.

A significant percentage of the population who are not artists themselves struggle to understand modern art, more specifically, abstract expressionism. Jackson pollack is a painter that is often brought up with this topic, this is because the average person does not see a function with his paintings. The brushstrokes are seemingly unintentional and a its non-physical object so what is its purpose and what makes it so valued when anyone can do it? It could be argued that he has no skill because he just sprays paint everywhere, however you could argue that he did it when no one else did, cornered the market and created something no one had thought about. he pioneered a completely unheard-of genre in modern art and that takes skill in of itself. The issue here is

a lack of understanding for personal narrative. People can find it easier to understand personal narrative when it is physical artwork, like a sculpture, or when the meaning is more blatant for example when an artwork has words written on it or it is a lot more obvious to decipher its meaning. Having to think about the intentions of the artist and even form your own connection to a piece and interpret it in your own way is not something that non artists are used to.

This is where we explore intentional verses passive consumption of art. When they enter an art gallery, they are entering the world of the artist, this is an intentional choice made by the consumer. They chose to enter the gallery therefore choosing to consume art. This is active and purposeful consumption. By looking at artworks purposefully and taking time to consider then you are learning how to perceive concepts outside of your own reality, maybe even experiences you haven't had but the artist is trying to convey to you. It is hard to enjoy consuming abstract art if you do not understand it. However it could also be argued that understanding is not needed for enjoyment, music is a good example of this. Everyone passively consumes music, another form of art. Music can of course be listened to with intention, but by listening to the radio in the car or while shopping it is not a conscious choice made by the listener. They are not wondering what the musician was thinking about when they wrote the music or what its meaning might be, just whether they like it or not. This supports the argument that all forms of art are up for judgement

regardless of what the artist is trying to say or whether the consumer cares that or not.



The artist Glen Martin Taylor creates artwork that takes functional object and creates non-functional sculptures. He uses the art of Japanese Kintsugi to break and repair his work. The skill that breaking these objects in the right way takes is impressive alone. His skill in welding/soldering and wire work is also incredibly talented craftsmanship. Conveying personal narrative in such a striking way also takes vast amounts of skill not only in an art sense but mentally too, emotional vulnerability is a skill in itself. There is a hidden function of these sculptures beyond physical usage; conveying personal narratives. His work is laced with relatability and real life struggles with trauma and mental illness. His use of symbolism in choosing what objects to include and with what words create pieces that have powerful meaning. The use of metal next to ceramic and found objects is fascinating and catches the eye, leaving you asking questions of what it means and how he came up with such

an idea. His work explores functionality in an abstract way, making functional objects non functional representing becoming non functional as a person with trauma. His art is so raw and thought provoking that It connects with others who feel the same and inspires them to try this kind of 'art therapy'. The deep personal narratives in his work is something that he says is at the core of his art. To quote him, Taylor said "Art is how we expose our naked souls. If it doesn't, you're doing it wrong." (Taylor, 2021)



Courtney Hassmann is a ceramics artist who also implements personal narrative into their work. Hassmann's work is more functional, mainly focusing on the creation of vessels like mugs and cups. what stands out about her work is the use of decorative illustration as well as poetry onto these vessels. she uses great amounts of technical skill in ceramics to create pinch pots which she

then attaches handles to make the mugs. She demonstrates skill in a unique way by using her knowledge for a difficult to master clay, porcelain, to create intricate checkerboard patterns in black and white clay using only a pinch method. It would be favoured to use a slab building method to create this effect in an easier to obtain way but she has mastered the pinch method which gives a look and a feel like nothing else in the ceramics world. She uses striking earth tones such as brown and green, as well as the odd black and white piece showing her diverse knowledge of colour theory and glazing techniques. She uses glazes that would usually run and applies them very thinly with a slip trailer to create patterns and illustrations with a shiny finish that contrasts the matte finish of the clay itself. She often depicts whimsical illustrations on her mugs alongside everyday objects and poetry, these are created using underglaze pencils and underglazes. A vast amount of technical skill is needed to understand what temperature is all the different glazes used fired to and make sure they all line up and come out looking as good as they do. Some of the meanings behind the designs are reflections on becoming an adult and functioning as one should within society. Social anxiety and executive dysfunction the effect how we function and interact with our surroundings and people around us. The contrast between deep emotional poetry and everyday objects like a toaster or a shoe, show how sometimes being functional means having to put more energy into basic needs than others. She states that functional art is cool and fun, often it is seen that objects that serve a function are boring and have to be plain and mundane.

Reflecting on this essay I would say my understanding of scale has developed and changed through my consideration of the artists and how skill doesn't

have to be material only. artists must have emotional skill to be able to convey personal narrative in their work efficiently to the viewer. within my own practise I have learned that not only is skill what you repeat and what you copy from masters in your field but it is also what you learn and develop through your own practical journey of making. I think problem solving is a huge part of developing skill and if you follow the rules step by step you are not making mistakes that you can learn by. a lot of my work is about personal narrative and it takes a lot of energy to be able to convey how you feel about things in your life to people who have not experienced them or may never experience anything similar in their life. I have learned that to perform the skills that are expected of me as a maker is something that I need to master in of itself as someone who has attention deficit problems, even performing and practising those skills that help me master my practise is difficult as I find motivation to create hard to come by even though I enjoy it. I never seem to understand before I engage, as going into a task blindly with only vague instruction is so much more rewarding for me. I like to create and problem solve in the moment and find that I learn a lot more from that compared two following instructions. I don't feel that to improve skills you have to fear failure and getting it wrong should be welcomed as a healthy part of the making process. I feel that skill is defined by each individual person as no one person values the same thing whether that be art or academics or something completely different. Skill is not synonymous with being objectively good at something, it's not what you know it's what you dare to find out.

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