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

Skill is a rich and complex idea that involves much more than just technical ability. It includes experience, tacit knowledge - what we learn without always being able to explain it - creativity, and the cultural value we attach to making things by hand. Skill isn't fixed or purely mechanical; it's a reflective and ongoing relationship between the maker, their materials, and the context they work in. In the context of working with glass, skill is all about working closely with the material in a hands-on, process-driven way. Glass demands precision and care, but also flexibility and responsiveness because it's constantly changing. Learning to work with glass means developing a deep, embodied understanding of how it behaves, which is something you can only gain through experience and paying close attention in the moment. This essay will explore the idea of skill through three sections. One - skill in relation to the body, both physically and cognitively, referencing the works of Peter Dormer – tacit knowledge – and Tim Ingold – developing skill by doing. Two – exploring skill through

mending and making, discussing Angela Maddock – textile mending practice – and Jonathan Chapman – emotionally durable design. Third – exploring the relativity of skill and who defines it, supported by Foucault – theory of discourse and power - and Bourdieu – cultural capital.

In the context of glassmaking, skill is inseparable from the body. More specifically, from the hands ability to perceive, control, and respond in real time. Unlike purely mechanical processes, working with glass physically requires not just technical accuracy but a sensitivity to the behaviour of the material. The temperature, weight and state of the glass can be constantly changing, and the maker must constantly be able to adapt instinctively. This physical and cognitive negotiation between the hand the glass is what defines skilled making. Peter Dormer describes this as ‘intelligent making, as he argues that skill isn’t just the repetition of tasks but a form of ‘tactic knowledge’, which refers to a body of knowledge which we have gained through experience, both through the experience of our senses and through the experience of doing work of various kinds’ (Dormer, 1994). this is accurate within all styles of glassmaking as it is only through experience and your own senses that you develop the boundaries and techniques of glass, such as how much pressure you can apply, which boundaries you can push and how much head can be applied to get the desired effects. Dormer also argues that “the particular ‘touch’ of a violinist, pianist, or vet cannot be described, but it can be demonstrated and, to a degree, be imitated or even learned wholly by someone else” (Dormer, 1994) . This means that skill is often learned by watching others and practicing with them, not through written instructions. In glassmaking, we learn by working alongside more experienced makers, copying their movements and developing our own techniques. Tim Ingold

adds onto these ideas by suggesting that making is not just following a written plan, it's a conversation with the material itself. He writes, "It is, in short, by watching, listening and feeling - by paying attention to what the world has to tell us - that we learn." (Ingold, 2013). This especially applies to learning to work with glass, because it often doesn't behave in the way we expect. Skill means to work with the material instead of forcing it to cooperate, and only by paying attention and responding to it in the moment can the desired form be achieved. This embodied relationship between maker and material is reinforced by cultural and historical understandings of the hand. The concept of Homo Faber - "man the maker" – can be used as a way of thinking about the human as defined by tool use and creative manipulation of the environment. The hand is more than just a tool, it is a site of intelligence and expression. In Japanese aesthetics, the concept of Ma (negative space) and wabi-sabi (beauty in imperfection) further support an understanding of skill as sensitive, not resulting in exactly 'perfection'. In glass practice, a slightly asymmetric form, a softened edge, or a captured bubble can add character and narrative rather than signal failure. This is where the artistry of skilled making emerges – showing that something was made by hand, with care, risk and responsiveness. Overall, these findings show that in relation to glass, skill isn't just about technical precision - it's about the maker's ability to respond to the material through hands-on experience, intuition, and sensitivity. It's a learned conversation between the hand and the glass, where control, imperfection, and personal touch come together to show the care, risk, and responsiveness at the heart of skilled making.

Skill is not always about producing new things, it can also involve care, repair, and emotional connection. These ideas can be explored through the works of Angela

Maddock, who uses hand-stitching and repair as a form of gentle activism. In both textile and glassmaking, skill is shown in how materials are treated and valued. Her approach serves as a powerful reminder that skill can be slow, personal, and relational, not just technical. Maddock's practice focuses on hand sewing, particularly mending damaged or worn clothing. Rather than hiding the repair, she embraces the visible mending, letting each stitch tell a story. This approach links to traditional Japanese practices such as Kintsugi (repairing broken ceramics with gold) and Boro (patched textiles). These methods show that repairing something can make it more beautiful and meaningful, not less. They reflect an aesthetic of wabi-sabi, which celebrates imperfection and change. Maddock has described repair as a form of care, not just for objects but for people and relationships. "But I think the unpicking is part of that, the taking apart, the unmaking is very important.... I think they're beautiful ways of thinking about trying to resolve problems as well, that you might be able to unpick a problem and place it out in front of you and re-jig it and move it around." (Maddock, 2022). This idea connects deeply to glass and its practice. When remaking or saving a piece that hasn't gone to plan, it's not just about fixing an object, it's about reflecting on the process, learning from it, and often finding new meaning in the outcome. Skill, in this context, becomes more than the technical ability involved in fixing and mending. It involves empathy, patience, and the willingness to spend time with what's imperfect. This is supported by Jonathan Chapman's idea of emotionally durable design, where value comes not from novelty but from long-term relationships between people and objects. Chapman argues that good design encourages us to care for things, to hold onto them longer, and to appreciate the stories they carry (Chapman, 2005). This is reflected in Maddock's practice, where her mended garments hold memories, relationships, and time. This

approach is very different from the fast pace and throwaway culture of mass production. Instead of fast fashion or designing for quick use, Maddock supports what's called the craft of us. It's about appreciating things that are worn, repaired, and well-used, rather than always trying to create something new. In this way, skill isn't just about being innovative, it's also about caring for materials and honouring their history. Even though the medium is different, this can still relate through glassmaking. It can be about appreciating the quiet power of repairing or embracing flaws, and how that creates a deeper emotional connection with the object. Whether patching cloth or shaping glass, both practices show that skill is also a way of paying attention, and of being present, patient, and open to the unexpected. Overall, these findings link to show that skill isn't just about creating and making things 'perfectly', the concept of skill can also lie in being able to value what's already there and embrace the flaws through the process of mending and repairing.

When discussing skill, it's easy to think of it as something straightforward, like being good with your hands or knowing a technique really well. But the more you work with a medium such as glass, the more realised that what gets called 'skilled' can be relative - it can depend on who's judging, what's being made, and even how it's being talked about. Some techniques are praised, while others are overlooked, and that's not always about the work itself, it's about deeper ideas of value, tradition, and power. This can be explored by thinkers such as Foucault, who discusses how power and knowledge are connected, such as that what we know and how we talk about things is shaped by systems of control. He states, "Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice. Thus, there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field

of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations” (Foucault, 1977). This idea helps unpack why some forms of skill are seen as more valuable than others, because he explains that knowledge and by extension, skill, isn’t neutral. It’s shaped by power; by institutions, by history, and by the systems that decide what counts and what doesn’t. In glassmaking, it can often be debated about where the practice sits. It’s highly physical and technical, rooted in traditional craft knowledge, but also expressive and experimental. Still, there’s a tension. In some circles, glass is seen as “craft” - impressive, but maybe not as ‘intellectual’ or ‘critical’ as design or fine art. This creates a hierarchy, where hand skills are seen as secondary to ideas, even though those ideas are often born through making. However, this divide isn’t new. During industrialisation, there was a split between the ‘designer’ and the ‘maker’. Influential figures like Dieter Rams celebrated clean, rational forms that could be mass-produced, while someone like Victor Papanek argued for socially responsible design. Both were valuable, but they often left behind the physical knowledge of craftspeople - the people who actually know how materials behave and evolve in reality. This split helped create a culture where manual skill was seen as separate from thinking, when in reality, they’re deeply connected. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital adds another layer to this. He discusses how certain kinds of knowledge and taste are given more value than others, depending on their social context. In practice, this means that skills like hand-sewing or mending (often done by women) have historically been seen as ‘low’ or domestic, while sculpture or product design gets labelled as high culture. Even though both require creativity and precision, one is often taken more seriously than the other. This can relate to the way we see repair. As discussed earlier, artists like Angela Maddock use visible mending as a way to

challenge those assumptions. Her work shows that repair can be meaningful, skilled, and full of care. In the same way, this can be applied to moments in glass where things don't go to plan - not as failures, but as chances to adapt, repair, and respond to the material in the moment. That responsiveness is a huge part of developing skill as a maker, even if it doesn't always look 'perfect' in a traditional sense.

This essay has shown that skill in making is much more than just technical ability. It's an ongoing conversation between the maker, the material, and the meaning behind what's being made. Skill grows and changes over time, involving not only precision but also reflection, intuition, and the hands-on experience that can't always be put into words. When relating to a medium such as glass, this idea of skill is very clear. Glass requires careful control but also a readiness to respond to its unpredictability. The way it changes in temperature and shape means there is a need to stay flexible and attentive. Skill here isn't about making perfect objects every time, it's about understanding and working with the material in a creative and thoughtful way. The ideas discussed, such as those of Peter Dormer and Angela Maddock can help us see skill in a wider light. Dormer talks about skill as 'intelligent making', where thinking and feeling go hand in hand with doing, and much of this knowledge comes through experience and watching others. Maddock brings in the idea of slow-making and mending as a kind of gentle activism, showing how skill can also be about care and repair, not just production. Together, they remind us that skill connects to culture and values, not just technical skills. Looking to the future, as materials, tools, and social needs change, our idea of skill will need to change too. New technology and a focus on sustainability mean makers have to think differently about what skill means.

By understanding skill as a flexible, reflective process, we can keep it alive and meaningful.

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