

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

Artists and designers have discussed the idea of what 'effective' art and design is over many centuries; however, I believe they have instead been discussing what 'skilful' and 'unskilful' art or design is. Plato argued, states Janet Cameron, that "by representing the good in art, we strive to reach true knowledge in this world of illusion" (Cameron, 2013), however, in Ryan Michelle Miller's essay, 'Aesthetic truth through the ages', he argues "High modernists rejected this aesthetic theory as lifeless, seeing the truth of art as its subjective expression." (Miller, 2020). It seems, due to Miller and Cameron, that effective, skilful art is "truth"; however, like they have been discussing, we cannot definitively discern what 'truth' is. In this essay I will be exploring differing interpretations of the 'truth' of what skill is through whether mechanised, capitalistic, mass produced art and design can really be identified as skilful, and using this to define what skill is in this modern age. I will look at a number of theorists; however, I will look mainly at what skill is through the lense of John Ruskin and the Arts and Crafts movement, as well as briefly exploring the works of Charles Babbage and David Pye.

According to etymology online, skill could be a variety of things: "power of discernment...adjustment...[to] understand...[to] separate...[a] Sense of ability, cleverness" (etymonline, n.d, A). Jean Sibelius suggests that "Art is the signature of civilisations" (University of Plymouth, n.d.) but it could also be interpreted as "skill" being the signature of civilisations, as we can 'discern' the 'true' reflection of civilisations through artistic expressions and 'ability'. In relation to my practice of art and design, having a clear understanding of what skill is means that I can create art and design that will properly collaborate and integrate into society rather than being separate from it, thus become part of its 'signature', meaning that it will have achieved its 'truth', or rather skill.

Integration of knowledge and practice, which I will expand upon later, is a key concept in the arts and crafts movement. This even extends to the meaning of 'craft'. On one hand, to be 'crafty' is to be "clever, especially in a dishonest or secret way" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022), and on the other 'craft' is described as "skill... and talent" (etymonline, n.d, B). Both these descriptions link to the etymology of skill: a "sense of ability, cleverness" (etymonline, n.d., A) therefore, skill and craft are intertwined, so thus is the arts and craft movement and skill.

Now that I have looked at the definition of what skill is in this essay, it may be helpful to define what skill is not. The "head, hand and heart" (arts crafts, n.d.) was a beloved motto during the arts and crafts movement, combining knowledge, practice and passion to undermine industrialisation and capitalism, which, would be expressed as 'Amateur'. An amateur could be considered as having a lack of skill. According to etymology online, to be amateur is to "have a taste for art... but... not practice it" (etymonline, n.d, C), I would like to expand this further and suggest that 'to be amateur' is also to practice art but have no taste for it. John Ruskin, a key leader of the arts and crafts movement, or rather 'skill' movement, states that mass manufactory "lack[s] depth, subtlety, overtones, variegation and diversity" (Ruskin, 1892, pg 19), in other words 'taste for art', therefore, the unoriginality of mass manufactory cannot be described as craftsmanship, nor, therefore, can the labour be described as skilful, as the workers become "mere overlookers of machines" (Bizup, 2003, pg 59-60), the worker becomes a tool in the factory and doesn't create. Furthermore, Ruskin suggested that "it is not the material, but lack of human labour which makes things worthless" (Ruskin, 1892, pg 99), insinuating that it is the combination, the "head and hand" (arts crafts, n.d.) which makes something skilful. Ruskin coined the term of "dead or "alive" (Ruskin, 1892, pg 100) craftsmanship, and this lack of passion, 'taste' and 'sense of ability' due to delegation controversially

implies that mass manufactory is dead art, and integration of knowledge and practice is “alive”, like in Andy Warhol’s factory which I will explain further on in this essay.

The idea of “dead” or “alive” skill can be seen in AI “art”, for example. Artificial Intelligence (AI) art is a relatively new phenomenon; however, it reflects modern day ideas and emphasises the integration of technology in today’s society, essentially breaking away from Ruskin’s paradigm of what ‘skill’ and ‘art’ is. As Jean Sibelius puts it, “Art is the signature of civilisations” (University of Plymouth, n.d.), which places an emphasis and importance on the concept of ‘skill’ and what it signifies. However, AI art lacks emotions and passion for art and design, a key component when it comes to the practice (according to the Arts and Crafts movement) as there is an absence of human labour and depth. Furthermore, Ruskin suggests that the “point of skill [is in the] ... attainment of the hand and eye.” (Ruskin, 1892, pg 165), none of which AI art possesses, thus according to him it cannot be skilful.

However, isn’t skill also defined as “adjustment”? (etymonline, n.d. A) Did the arts and crafts movement not revolutionise like AI and technology today? According to David Pye, “Nobody is prepared to say where craftsmanship ends, and ordinary manufacture begins” (Pye, 1995, pg 20), nor, therefore, where the boundary of ‘Skillful’ and ‘Amateur’ lie. One could argue that machinery, and not AI, is an extension of our knowledge and practice, evolving our ability to create honestly, as ‘truth’ is a reflection of society. Take the book ‘Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture’ by Ingold, where the main theme is making as a process of growth, where “practioners and... materials answer, or correspond with one another” (Ingold, 2013, pg 1), allowing us to let go of closely held paradigms of what ‘skill’ is to introduce new ideas of what it could be. A view held by Charles Babbage shows just this: “Machines are not ingenious configurations of levers, screws, belts and gears. They are also material embodiments of abstract concepts and ideas” (Bizup, 2003, pg 55). However, this cannot apply to AI art, as the concepts and ideas are artificially produced, there is a definitive absence- not just of human labour, which I can argue is forgivable in the context of skill, but human thought. Therefore, AI art cannot be skilful, as skill is also ‘concepts and ideas’, as well as ‘knowledge and practice’. AI art is the ultimate ‘absence of human labour’ (Ruskin, 1892, pg 99) that Ruskin proposes. Furthermore, this suggests that skill is subjective rather than definitive, as concepts and ideas are linked to the artist, the ideas are the soul, the higher plane that humans can hold but machines, especially AI, cannot.

However, Babbage goes further than the arguably closed mindset of Ruskin and the arts and crafts movement, as he suggests that machines are extensions of our thoughts, essentially, we are still making and expressing, therefore human labour, if we interpret it further to include thoughts and ideas, can never be absent, even if machinery is used for production. Therefore, skill could simply be ‘tasteful’ concepts and ideas, as ‘sense of ability’ could be applied to “mechanical knowledge” (Bizup, 2003, pg 59-60), arguing against Ruskin’s idea that manufactory workers are “mere overlookers of machinery” (Bizup, 2003, pg 59-60). After all, manufactory contains the word man, so human labour and therefore skill in such sense cannot be so removed when it comes to factory production, etymology online also states that manufactory is “something made by hand” (etymonline, n.d, D) (and machinery is an extension of our hands), a stark contradiction to Ruskin’s belief system.

I believe, however, that the idea of the ‘head, hand and heart’ (artscrafts, n.d.) can still run through this modern era of mechanisation and mass-production. This can be done through communication. If we collaborate in production, not just labelling workers as tools, but elevating to technicians, and recognising the knowledge required in manufacturing, then this will liberate the Arts and Crafts movement’s idea of “head, hand and heart” from individuals to communities. Norman Bryson states that “Human Culture is made up of signs” (Rose, 2016, pg 107), not only emphasising the importance

of communication in our society, but also the importance of communication in design, the 'sign' element of 'design'. In the book 'Visual Methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials', it states that "Culture... is not so much a set of things- novels and paintings... as a process, a set of practices. Culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings" (Rose, 2016, pg 2). Since design is part of our culture- a "signature of civilisations" (University of Plymouth, n.d.), then communication is a key element, arguably the most important element, in skilful design. In contrast, Ruskin himself said "there is no hope of the progress of the arts of any nation which indulges in these vulgar and cheap substitutes for real decoration" (Ruskin, 1982, pg 101), i.e., suggesting capitalistic, money-driven designers cannot produce designs that are skilful and further the progression of their field, as skilful art and design should be symbolic, and, in contrast, worthless design has no in-depth semiotic meaning (expanding on the idea of "dead" art), nor does it have both the 'head' and the 'hand'. Take fast fashion for example, fast fashion designers such as Shien or Boohoo outsource their production to factories in Asia or south America (Bourke, 2021) (Jones, 2021). There is little to no communication between the designers and factory workers, with workers often sewing clothing with logos or sentences that they cannot translate, lacking, as I mentioned earlier "depth, subtlety, overtones, variegation and diversity" (Ruskin, 1892, pg 19) and instead exploiting them for their "hand", they have no creative input or control, and become "mere overlookers of machinery" (Bizup, 2003, pg 59-60). Ingold expands on this as he believes that "The mere provision of information holds no guarantee of...understanding." (Ingold, 2013, pg 12). The communication and truth of the designs are lost, and therefore the worker, and work cannot be skilled, as they have the 'practice' for the art, but not the taste, or in other words there is no "exchange of meanings" (Rose, 2016, pg 2), therefore it cannot be described as 'culture', as visual methodologies state, nor, therefore, can it hold the "signature of civilisations" (University of Plymouth, n.d.) or the 'truth' of skill in this modern age. In other words, it is Amateur, as "Industrial capitalism and its factory system [undermine] the conditions for... expressive labor" (Bullock, 2019). Meaning that skill cannot be found in factories that exploit and do not communicate, as this limits 'expression' and 'knowledge'.

However, it is questionable in the modern day and age, whether Ruskin is completely correct in claiming that mechanised, mass-produced art is 'worthless' and 'Amateur'. Take Andy Warhol for example, where the idea of the "head, heart and hand" (arts crafts, n.d.) runs through his work. Warhol, arguably, has both "mechanical knowledge" (Bizup, 2003, pg 59-60) as well as "abstract concepts and ideas" (Bizup, 2003, pg 55). His rebellion against modern art utilises outsourcing and production in mass manufactories, showing how skill and craftsmanship can be maintained in this global economy. His studio was called the 'factory', as John Cale states "It wasn't called the Factory for nothing. It was where the assembly line for the silkscreens happened. While one person was making a silkscreen, somebody else would be filming a screen test. Every day something new." (ArtLife, 2020) Cale implies there was a freedom in Warhol's factory, it is more of a collaboration, an "exchange", creating a culture, where the worker becomes "a product of [the] Factory" (ArtLife, 2020), unlike the disjointed fast- fashion production. Andy Warhol's work communicates through his mass-productions and collaborations with the worker, i.e., The workers were extensions of Warhol's 'hand' and Warhol's 'head', his ideas, was extended to the workers. As I mentioned earlier, "Nobody is prepared to say where craftsmanship ends, and ordinary manufacture begins" (Pye, 1995, pg 20) and I believe this applies to Andy Warhol's factory, disproving Ruskin's idea that all mass-manufacture "lacks depth [and] subtlety" (Ruskin, 1982, pg 19) as Andy Warhol's work, I believe, has the "head, hand and heart" (arts crafts, n.d.). Therefore, collaboration (or integration which I mentioned at the beginning of my essay) of the 'head' and the 'hand', whether it is one's own or an extension, creates a skilled product and a lack of communication between the 'head' and the 'hand'

can be described as amateur. Warhol was rehabilitating the factory with skilled technicians and not just workers who overlooked machines with no creative expression. In the essay 'From labour to value: Marx, Ruskin, and the critique of capitalism', it states that "while intelligent labor is necessary for expressing and cultivating our essential human nature, industrial capitalism had undermined those conditions in the interest of mass production" (Bullock, 2019). Therefore, modern day factories such as Andy Warhol's reject this capitalistic production in favour of a new, innovative way of producing which embraces skill through 'intelligent labour'.

In conclusion, therefore, the "head, hand and heart" (arts crafts, n.d.) can describe the meaning of 'skill' and the abstraction of individual elements of this motto means that a product will become amateur. The heart element is "concepts and ideas" (Bizup, 2003, pg 55), the soul of the product one is creating, which cannot be replicated through processes such as AI technology (which I defined as amateur earlier in this essay), and is a uniquely human and natural process, which cannot be programmed nor have the humanity taken from it, the "absence of human labour" (Ruskin, 1892, pg 99) means that it will become "dead", as Ruskin promoted it. The head concept is 'knowledge and understanding' and this is unequivocally linked to the hand, the 'practice and production' of the product. Combining these elements, such as Andy Warhol did in his 'factory' allows both technicians and designers to communicate and relate to the work that they are completing, instead of being removed and isolated, or becoming "mere overlookers" (Bizup, 2003, pg 59-60) such as Boohoo or Shien's designers and laborers, where the head and the hand is abstracted through lack of meaningful communication or understanding. The exchange of the "head, hand and heart" (arts crafts, n.d.) creates a culture of creativity within the factory, (as in this modern age, the arts and crafts motto is transformed to include machinery and technicians which have become extensions of the designers hand) to create art that is alive with soul, knowledge of practice and collaboration, so the designers and workers themselves also become the products, as an artist in Warhol's factory expressed. This is where skilled products are created, where art that can be described as a "signature of civilisations" (University of Plymouth, n.d.) is produced. Taking David Pye's quote "nobody is prepared to say where craftsmanship ends" (Pye, 1995, pg 20), I believe that if you integrate the "head, hand and heart" (arts crafts, n.d.) through all stages of production, one can argue that "craftsmanship" or rather "skill", as I connected earlier, never ends.

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