

Designer-maker:
hybrid strategies for interrogative making in design

By

Melanie Girdwood

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Abstract

In 1989 design historian John A. Walker wrote of the possibility of a shift from large-scale production to small-scale batch production as a mitigating factor against the globalization of design production. For Walker, this shift in the scale of design production helpfully offered a repositioned stance from which design could look to vernacular character and local identity as a counterpoint to a homogenized aesthetic. This decentered position - viewed as a reaction to the issues Walker identified - serves another crucial function namely as an objective position from where designers may engage in cross-disciplinary practices. The designer-maker occupies an identifiable gap between craft and design, and is engaged in a form of post-disciplinary workmanship that neither craft nor design discourses have fully captured. In light of the phenomenon of small batch production and hand making by designers in the years since Walker's pronouncement, the activities taking place within the post-disciplinary gap may be viewed, I argue, as the result of designers' alienation from the experience of material production. Furthermore, contemporary designer-maker practices work against what crafts historian Howard Risatti terms "limitlessness" — wherein there is little to give an absolute value or perspective to things, and a lack of human dimensions that might give comparison to effort and scale. Against this the work of contemporary designer-makers reconsiders labour value and materiality as guiding threads within a production strategy that is both self-reflexive and critical of mainstream design practices.

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For Alex.

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Introduction

In 1989 design historian John A. Walker wrote of the possibility of a shift from large-scale production to small-scale batch production as a mitigating factor against the globalization of design production. For Walker, this shift in the scale of design production helpfully offered a repositioned stance from which design could look to vernacular character and local identity as a counterpoint to a homogenized aesthetic.¹ This decentered position - viewed as a reaction to the issues Walker identified - serves another crucial function namely as an objective position from where designers may engage in cross-disciplinary practices. The designer-maker occupies an identifiable gap between craft and design, and is engaged in a form of post-disciplinary workmanship that neither craft nor design discourses have fully captured. In light of the phenomenon of small batch production and hand making by designers in the years since Walker's pronouncement, the activities taking place within the post-disciplinary gap may be viewed, I argue, as the result of designers' alienation from the experience of material production.² Furthermore, contemporary designer-maker practices work against what crafts historian Howard Risatti terms "limitlessness" — wherein there is little to give an absolute value or perspective to things, and a lack of human dimensions that might give comparison to effort and scale.³ Against this the work of contemporary designer-makers reconsiders labour value and materiality as guiding threads within a production strategy that is both self-reflexive and critical of mainstream design practices.

¹ John A. Walker, *Design History and the History of Design* (Pluto Press 1990), 122.

² This alienation has a number of possible sources, from the abstracting nature of computer-aided design practices and digital outputs, to the specialized fragmentation of design processes.

³ Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft; Function and Aesthetic Expression* (The University of North Carolina Press 2007), 186.

Design production has shifted in the years since Walker's statement, with some critical strains (so-called 'critical design' and the designer-maker movement) emerging as self-reflexive practices questioning mainstream design's "special" status. The contemporary practices discussed in this paper illustrate three instances of designer-maker engagement with alternate production strategies as means to interrogate or intervene in the limitlessness of mainstream design processes. The designer-maker implements a variety of hand making skills and practical knowledge acquired through a direct engagement with material research and small batch production. It is through the implementation of these production methods that designer-maker practices provide a reconsidered context from which the unique designer-made product may be evaluated and which represent a means of intervention through a form of workmanship. Providing a reconsidered context from which design as a problem-solving activity and production processes may be re-evaluated, the post-disciplinary nature of the designer-maker furthermore invokes the persistence in discourse of a problematic division between craft and design⁴, as declared through the use of terms – designer and maker.

The form of inquiry represented by designer-maker practice – its cross-disciplinary activities between industrial design and crafts, and its self-consciously critical stance – appears antithetical to normalized standards of material resources, production processes, and even forms. Cross-disciplinary practice is recognized by postmodern discourse in the visual arts as an effective means to identify and respond to disciplinary gaps in discourse, with emergent and marginalized practices serving as

⁴ See: Walker, 22. Walker cites the rise of the forms as separate disciplines and the attempts to draw circles around the limits of these new disciplines as problematic as the boundary lines are always fuzzy rather than sharp.

indicators of contemporary shifts in disciplinary values⁵. As argued by Walker, design discourse has not entirely explored cross-disciplinary activities occurring outside of its paradigms (those established by modernist aesthetic ideals, and formal inquiry)⁶, but designer-maker practices represent an unexplored potential for investigating questions of post-disciplinarity in crafts and design. What does it mean for the contemporary designer-maker to become almost entirely responsible for and implicated in production, approaching “making” much in the same way as a craftsperson? What role do materiality, technology and notions of progress play in this calculated step? And how does this practice reflect back on our understanding of design as a conceptual and industrial-technical field?

These questions highlight shifts in values providing the grounds for a renewed approach to the critique of limitlessness made by Risatti, who identifies craft practices as providing a counteracting effect to the overwhelming success of “mechano-techno-scientific culture [that]... blinds us to all other ways of seeing and understanding.”⁷ The designer-makers actively engage with the implications of making beyond the point of purchase, directly intervening against limitlessness through their use of post-disciplinary materials and production contexts. The intensive manipulation of materials in pre-production and the production itself allows the designer-maker to develop an intimate understanding of the material’s physical and technological properties. I surmise that the maker may then, also understand the outcome of making post-production, and even post-consumption –much in the same way an engine mechanic understands the intricate machinations of an engine through its manipulation, use and the observation of its

⁵ See: Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, New Left Review (I/146), July-August 1984.

⁶ See: Walker, 24-27.

⁷ Risatti, 186-87.

performance, and finally the recycling or reuse of its parts when its peripheral components have failed. In an important sense, I suggest, the works produced out of these contexts gains its value less from their formal dimensions, than from their existence as material artefacts speaking to the processes that went into their making. The full impact of these processes or efforts, at the same time, can only be understood or appreciated via these contexts, and in relation to (as reaction against) the norms of mass-production. Limitlessness thus provides an opening within which the designer-maker is inserted, within the disciplinary gaps, and with space to consider and engage with a scope of other activities occurring at the outer margins of making. Situated within these margins, at the intersection of craft (the production of objects by hand) and design (industrial, mass-reproducible object, conceived by the designer standing at some remove from processes of production), designer-maker practices foreground their intervention in the craft-design binary; while establishing a third path between these terms, they also hold both at once, as designer and maker.

The difficulty in framing cross-disciplinary activities that emerge from unstable categories such as “crafts” and “design” is in providing context where contemporary production values and materiality are concerned. The boundlessness of designer-maker practices defies easy categorization and signals the elapsing of certain categories such as “craftsmanship”, which have long eluded any stable understanding. For some observers this produces a dangerously groundless position: crafts historian Peter Greenhalgh, for example, is wary of ideologies emerging from a “signifier that has no stable significance, from which people sift and choose from a selection of partial meanings.”⁸ Through its conjunction of the terms ‘designer’ and ‘maker’ – established as opposites at the outset of

⁸ Peter Greenhalgh, “The History of Craft”, in *The Culture of Craft*, Peter Dormer, ed. (Manchester University press 1997) 20.

the modern era – the designer-maker movement prompts additional questions; intended as an affirmation of identity through a direct refusal of these terms’ established incompatibility, this name also repeats and affirms terms that are themselves compromised, and whose roles and meanings have shifted continuously over the past century. The binary opposition of these terms occurred as a consequence of the refinement of a mass-manufacturing model in Europe and (especially) the United States during the Industrial Revolution in the late 1800s; which saw the emergence of a number of binaries encompassing a complex field of human production: craft/industry, freedom/alienation, explicit/tacit, and so on, introducing conceptual divisions into previously undeclared worlds of making.⁹ These binaries sometimes linger as popular biases: craftspeople do not design, or they do not problem-solve. Instead they follow time-tested patterns and skills, without creative agency over these. Conversely, the design process is largely equated with the conception of two-dimensional renderings to be translated into a template for use in mechanized mass-production, with skilled labourers executing the work as outlined by the designer’s specifications, and with little to no acknowledgement. In both cases, creative interpretation is denied the maker, and is seen only to reside with the ‘designer’ as one who does not make. Risatti’s outline of design as part of a two-stage process – the creation of the abstract notation, followed by the actual making of the object,¹⁰ reflects perceptions even among theorists and practitioners. He correctly identifies the division of labour between designer and fabrication necessary to the rapid pace and (so-called) efficiency of mass-reproducible production processes.

The recent rise of a challenge to this binary understanding, and the emergence of designer-maker attitudes and practices might be traced back to the 1960s in the United

⁹ Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (Bloomsbury 2013), xiii.

¹⁰ Risatti, 171.

Kingdom, when, due to initiatives such as the institutionalization of specialized programs, craft activity was upgraded from a marker of pre-industrial trades, to a field of practice promoted by the Craft Council (UK) and pursued as a middle-class activity and form of visual and material expression. Historian Judy Attfield provides a historical context for the institutionalized appropriation of the term designer-maker in Britain in the 1970s, when “design schools and institutions encompassed an engagement in multi-disciplinary practices as an intensive approach to materiality and process. The recognition of this engagement is situated in the upgrading of craft activity from pre-industrial trades to the type of craft ... conforming to a modern rather than a traditional aesthetic.”¹¹ These developments are echoed in contemporary developments in designer-craftsperson (and artist-craftsperson) practices: Glenn Adamson has written extensively on developments over the past decade, that have seen artists and craftspeople increasingly switch to post-disciplinary and non-hierarchical directions. In contemporary craft, for instance, Adamson suggests that “a signature feature of the post-disciplinary condition [is] the free movement of makers in relation to their own practices, and the ensuing discovery of new forms of friction, from the physical to the political”.¹² The view of a blurring of boundaries is shared by Adamson’s contemporary Nicholas Bell, curator of American Craft and Decorative Art at the Renwick Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., who has advocated for a broader understanding of craft within institutions of art and design that would be more inclusive of cross-disciplinary processes. The 2012 exhibit *40 Under 40*, curated by Bell, highlighted the emergent trend toward post-disciplinary making in crafts. Where Bell was once criticized for “running

¹¹ Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Berg 2000), 69-70.

¹² Adamson, 33.

away from defined boundaries”¹³ he is among a range of critical voices suggesting that new hybrid directions in craft are rapidly changing the field, and has even suggested replacing the term ‘craft’ with a more encompassing ‘materialism’ for studio craft disciplines.¹⁴ The exhibit featured makers whose works are difficult to fit within more “traditional” skill or media based parameters. The makers, all under forty years of age at the time of the exhibit, and engaged in various forms of cross-disciplinarity, were selected as epitomizing the social and cultural uncertainty of their generation. Bell argues that several formative social catalysts permit the makers a range of movement, citing among them, “the rise of postcolonialism, third-wave feminism, ethical manufacture, and the embrace of new technologies.”¹⁵ Bells adds, “the content of each is underscored by the introduction of hypertext twenty years ago...the World Wide Web and its inclusion of hyperlinks...permits a circumnavigation of the linearity and delineation of content otherwise fundamental to modern thought. Coupled with the saturation of contemporary life with devices for accessing the Web, this freedom to jump around...renders formerly closed loops of information porous, and permits the annals of culture to be read differently, combined in new ways, and pilfered for content.”¹⁶

The tendency toward cross-disciplinary activities is the hallmark of the activities adopted by makers who are at ease with “sampling” from various resources afforded to them by unlimited access to digitalized information, and allowing them to form new identities as makers such as varying iterations of “designer” and “maker” as alternatives

¹³ Nicholas Bell, keynote address at OCAD University, *Recombinant Creativity* conference, March 7, 2014.

¹⁴ Sociologist Richard Sennett cautions against the use of this term due to its alternate associations with Marxist discourse.

¹⁵ Nicholas Bell, *Craft Futures: a generation at hand*, in *40 Under 40: Craft Futures* (Yale University Press, 2012) 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

to “craftsperson”. Variations such as “designer and maker”, “designer and potter”, “furniture designer and maker” and so forth, highlights a broader acceptance of modes of cross-disciplinary production from both “sides” (crafts and design), adopting features typically perceived as ‘design’ practices and constituting the key difference from craft, namely the former’s use of technology in the form of industrial resources (and materials) and manufacturing processes. These are practices valued by some contemporary craftspeople, who deploy similar resources and production models to those used by designers. This tendency has garnered attention from mainstream publications such as England’s *The Guardian*¹⁷ and *American Craft* magazine. The latter publication’s 2013 bonus issue exclusively featured works by what editor-in-chief Monica Moses called a “modern day craftsperson – the material-savvy artist who also excels in design,” deploying an approach she defined as “design as a business strategy.”¹⁸

For his part, Adamson argues for the consideration and use of open-ended crafts processes, allowing room for craft to be accepted as an ethos rather than as a medium-based discipline.¹⁹ In this context, artists’ and designers’ engagement with crafts is thus used as a strategy for thinking through ideas and production.²⁰ Interestingly, when interviewed for *American Craft* magazine (October/November 2012) many makers featured in *40 Under 40*, when each asked to describe their generation indicated a sense of insecurity defined by the intersection of their formative years in an analogue age combined with newly digitized tools and resources.²¹ The tendency toward analogue

¹⁷ Justin McGirk, “The Art of Craft: The Rise of the Designer-maker”. *Art and design/guardian.co.uk*: n. pag. Web. 1 August, 2011.

¹⁸ Monica Moses, *American Craft Bonus Issue: Design* (2013), 6.

¹⁹ Adamson, 87.

²⁰ Adamson, 1.

²¹ Monica Moses, “Future Tense – 40 Under 40”, in *American Craft* magazine, November/October 2012, 79-89.

processes, or the crafts ethos characterizing the designer-maker, is broadly defined by the sampled activities adapted by its practitioners and the aesthetic nature of the objects produced. The dimension of labour value through workmanship as a notable similarity between the designer-made and craft object, foregrounded by the processes and skills used in production, further confounds attempts at categorization. As Walker observed in 1989, “[w]hile theorists strive to draw ever sharper boundaries around the realms of art, design, craft, and so forth, their efforts are constantly undermined by practitioners who delight in working in the gaps between the realms or who combine them in unexpected ways.” Continuing in his line of thinking Walker added: “[d]esign historians thus find themselves confronting hyphenated beings, called ‘artist-designers’ and ‘designer-craftsperson’...”²² The designer-maker, for example, favouring forms of independent production and dissemination, refutes the model of manufacturer as mediator between makers and retailers. The scope of this model is increasingly broadening; in 2013, the Canadian design magazine *Azure* featured a series foregrounding the growing tendency of designers to seek out alternative ways of producing.²³ The process of seeking out new partnerships for production and distribution that turns away from the dominant model reveals both the “standardized” concealed activities of design, and new ideologies that reconsider design as a problem-solving activity – rather than Walker’s description of it as a potentially “socially detrimental problem-making activity.”²⁴

Among contemporary theorists such as Adamson and Bell, art historian Ezra Shales argues, rather than wrestling with taxonomies and categories based on unstable terms that don’t work, “there is greater value in researching the marginalized voices and

²² Walker, 26.

²³ See: “We Made It”, *Azure Magazine* (issue 227), October 2013, 94.

²⁴ Walker, 51.

unexamined perspectives of the shop floor.”²⁵ For the viewer of objects who is removed from the process of its making, a product typically represents an incomplete document, as the conditions of production of industrially manufactured goods are typically “hidden” due to the seamlessness of objects and the distance of production. When the labour value of a typical mass-produced product is considered and understood, the amount of what is hidden or withheld by mass-reproducible design becomes especially meaningful. The designer’s role in this invisible production is presented to the general population, in design’s various specialized iterations – architecture, industrial design, and graphic design – as that of a professional who maintains the loftier position of the conceptual thinker, completely removed from the physical manipulation of materials.

Considering the nature of “hands-on” processes of critical investigation through making, the designer-makers discussed in the following case studies do not demonstrate intent to “re-design” a type-form (here, a chair) through explorative prototyping, but instead question design processes and the separation of designing from making, through independent production. Their investigative processes are consistent with the nature of making itself, inquiries described by Adamson as an analogue practice, that firstly maintains the commonly accepted notion (supported by writer and master wood turner David Pye, and sociologist Richard Sennett, among others) that learning and thinking are engaged through doing and repetition. This view is consistent with forms of prototyping, through which the maker investigates and finalizes a form by way of creating models. The act of repetition is also the way by which innumerable individuals obtain and master skills. Adamson then adds another dimension to the notion of analogue practice: that not only is learning engaged through doing, but that doing (making) can function as a mirror

²⁵ Ezra Shales, “Mass Production as an Academic Imaginary”, *The Journal of Modern Craft*, (vol.6, iss.3) November 2013, 268.

that reflects back on the (physical, social, cultural) conditions of its making. Thus the shape of a made thing can be determined by these conditions *and* be a critical expression of them, thus becoming more than a formal or aesthetic investigation or expression of form. For Adamson, making is a way for makers to reflect acquired knowledge or skills back at themselves (or viewers), and a way of holding a mirror up to issues of concern.²⁶ Analogue practices then, can be latent or explicit reactions to the conditions of limitlessness.

For designer-makers engaging in making through a crafts ethos, a purposeful distancing from mainstream processes may be in pursuit of a nostalgic, pre-industrial pastoral experience, one tied to a vernacular narrative usually associated with crafts or literary concepts. Adamson notes that as a literary tool, the pastoral mode often gained "...its reflective qualities only at the price of an inability to deal concretely with cultural reality, as the author takes refuge from complex cultural problems in evocations of an imagined simpler realm." He adds that a craft ethos can exemplify both "the positive and negative aspects of the pastoral: making... is valued in itself but also as a symbolic gesture about the value of lifestyle, integrity, and so forth - but also its tendency toward sentimental escapism." However, he concludes, "when it is occupied self-consciously, rather than in a celebratory or promotional manner... [the pastoral] can be a powerful way of envisioning social and artistic change."²⁷ Much as they navigate a position between craft and design, between distance and nearness to making, designer-makers with their hybrid practices occupy, at different times and to different degrees, both the critical and escapist forms of the pastoral noted by Adamson.

²⁶ Adamson, xiii.

²⁷ Adamson, 104-105.

The designer-maker practices discussed here operate from a critical position that explores the nature of design and crafts production against the state of limitlessness described by Risatti; intentionally removing themselves from design processes that adhere to mass-production processes (the unchecked distribution of labour, outsourcing, increased digitization of design, and so forth) and increasingly homogenized places of making. Although they should be seen as questioning the abstracted state created by the homogenization of mass-manufacturing processes, it is important to note that designer-makers do not oppose technology. They engage with the mechanics of production, and are in many instances found to be creating their own machines for making. But through their approach to making, they foreground the fundamental disconnection of design from a basic understanding of making, that is the hallmark of the distribution of labour.

Designer-makers' intentional rejection of mass-manufacturing practices additionally enables them to engage with unexplored possibilities for making. As a production strategy, the engagement in hand making and small batch production inherently refutes mass production, instead foregrounding concerns such as labour value and materiality. These confrontations may take the form of a direct engagement with processes reflecting the crafts ethos, but may also be less concerned with producing a polished object and instead choose to focus on plastic qualities of alternatively sourced materials, diverse forms of making in the everyday, or overlooked spaces of production. These materials, forms and spaces, mined for their vernacular qualities and for a sense of authentic material quality and labour values, confer on a form-type the fulfillment of the unique, or authentic object sought out by the designer-makers. The three designer-maker practices presented below exemplify the shift away from the homogeneity of mass-reproducible production in various ways: each practice confronts the abstracted position

typically occupied by the designer of the mass-produced object, with the added benefit of narrative qualities that analogue practices such as hand making and small batch production can also offer, and further disclose information about the environmental, social and cultural conditions in which they take place.

The designer engaged with hand making or self-production as a means of bringing together idea and execution, increases the potential for design to function as a critical intervention into the practices and discourse of design itself, highlighting ongoing debates around authorship, intentionality, and ideologies that obscure the social nature of design.²⁸ Whereas the industrial designer's brief is to create templates for products intended for mass markets (contrasting sharply with craft production), the designer-maker's is dependent on an economy based on small batch and bespoke production, producing in many cases a singular, unique object.²⁹ Designer-makers also engage with a 'decentered' view of the design process. The increasingly decentered position occupied by the designer – offered I argue, in the role of designer-maker - constitutes, according to graphic designer and theorist Michael Rock, an alternative model to the 'designer as author' model by usefully implicating the many layers involved in design process and production, and highlighting the "multiplicity of methods that comprise design language"³⁰ Indeed in considering the critical interpretative approaches to the study of the history of making, John A. Walker has also argued that design historians and theorists must ask more critical questions and avoid isolating objects, insofar as this isolation of objects (or their creators) has the effect of raising them to cult status, while ignoring other

²⁸ Walker, 50.

²⁹ Attfield, 62-63.

³⁰ Michael Rock, "Designer as Author", in *Multiple Signatures: On Designers, Authors, Readers and Users* (Rizzoli 2013), 55.

elements such as context and process. As historian Judy Attfield has argued, the object-based study used as an attempt at objective critical discourse doesn't work. Quoting philosopher Pierre Bourdieu she adds: 'The objectification is always bound to remain partial and therefore false, so long as it fails to include the point of view from which it speaks and so fails to construct the game as a whole.'³¹ Just as an emphasis on the designer reduces the complex network of relations in which objects exist to a matter of individual intention and creative power, so a focus on the formal characteristics of the designed object crucially removes the designer's role and responsibilities from the process of production. Design, as Walker argues, recognized as a social activity and not as some activity or thing that mysteriously comes into being, repositions the designed object as a social object (and the designer as implicated in social activity) in whose production many people are involved.³² This is particularly relevant to the designer-maker as notions of authorship are challenged through their production processes made available to viewers, and while the designer-maker movement works against this by making production processes available, it inscribes a reconsidered notion of the designer-as-author; however insofar as the designer-maker here conceives and makes the work, the tactile role is necessarily practical one integral to production, and as is shown in these case studies through the work of Studio SWINE, one that deglamorizes design processes and production.

Other challenges to the mainstream design paradigm, seen in the examples of the following case studies, is the challenge to material value through the use of alternative and sometimes highly unusual material resources. In the case of the *Chinese Stools*, the

³¹ Judy Attfield, "Form/female Follows Function/male: Feminist Critiques of Design", in *Design History and the History of Design*, 210-211.

³² Walker, 50.

original stools functioned as a kind of material autobiography of the maker (and user) through the many repaired layers: parts worn out through repeated use, weather and potentially other incidents and subjected to the environments very public and high traffic areas in which they were being used. Putting aside notions of “good” design, the unmistakable “slap-dash” quality of some of the forms, somewhat haphazardly hand-assembled, are a long way from the high aesthetic and production standards of craft traditions; but it is precisely these material qualities that are interesting points of entry into the work.

The work by design duo Mischer’Traxler questions production methods, as well as the authentication ascribed to an object through production and branding. Questioning the mark intentionally left by the maker, or a maker’s stamp or signature on the product, serves to affirm a sense of authenticity, impacting the user’s experience of the object – as does the knowledge that the product is made in smaller quantities and under controlled conditions. In crafts discourse, authenticity is acquired through process used by the maker (legitimacy comes from years of learned skill and fine-tuning techniques and approach), but may also be related to the place of provenance, its uniqueness, as well as its materiality. If we consider the anthropologist Daniel Miller’s contention that an overt sense of materiality is capable of “shocking us into awareness,”³³ then in the case of designer-makers who choose to explicitly declare process and materiality, this awareness takes place not only at the level of production, but also that of reception, re-contextualized for the viewer. Deeper implications of the working conditions of the human labourer, are often obscured from the viewer when considering industrial design and mass-produced products, overlooked in favour of aesthetics or use value. Sociologist

³³ Daniel Miller, “The Power of Making” in Daniel Chaney ed. *The Power of Making: The Importance of Being Skilled* (V&A Publishing, 2011), 14-27.

Richard Sennett, in his 2008 book *The Craftsman*, argues that an overreliance on technology has created a disassociation from how and who makes things, making passive witnesses of users.³⁴ This implicates designers (and consumers), who are increasingly distanced from production, desensitized to the implications of mass production and for whom labour value is withheld or abstracted. In the case of the designer-maker, understood as merging two distinct roles, the making/designing individual is opened up to a greater understanding of materials and fabrication processes, at the same time as it is positioned outside the traditional confines of design's industrial parameters, occupying a disciplinary grey zone.

³⁴ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, (Yale University Press 2008), 44.



Figure 1. *Sea Chair*, 2007. Image permission courtesy of Studio SWINE.

II. Case Study 1: *Sea Chair* by Studio SWINE (Azusa Murakami and Alexander Groves)

*“Since manufacture always has to be practiced upon materials, its first implication is that it [the artefact] may show signs of the constraints these materials bring to the technological process... Any such artefact may seek either to proclaim or to hide the material used and the constraints the material has imposed upon the technological process.” – Daniel Miller*³⁵

As the use of raw materials (typically understood as natural resources) or what Heidegger calls the “standing reserve”³⁶ has become unsustainable, some designer-makers articulate their concerns through making with the use of “found” materials. In these instances, form may reflect local vernacular as it can be determined in part by industrial fabrication methods of each region, and the materials and technologies found in situ. In the third case study - *Chinese Stools* - they are ‘found’ as vernacular instances of form, whereas in the case of the *Sea Chair* the designers find their materials in post-consumer detritus, which they then shape into forms. This “prime matter”³⁷ as a kind of sourced material, describes a sense of vernacular; whereas once “raw” (for example, the distinctive qualities of wood species available would create regional differences in construction) materials were locally sourced for use in making – defining the vernacular by the trades emerged within each region – now materials such as industrial by-products, “hackable” after market components, and repurposed domestic waste created by an overabundance of production and consumption, are explored as viable resources for making within the context of a globalized vernacular.

³⁵ Miller, n.p.

³⁶ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (Harper & Row 1977), 17.

³⁷ This is a term used by artist Abraham Cruzvillegas, referring to the building material used in the form of self-construction adopted through necessity in many towns and cities. See: <http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/2013/abraham-cruzvillegas-art-autoconstruccion>.

The diversity of materials and processes in use requires the viewer or user to reconsider notions of accepted materials and form, thus, potentially becoming more aware of how an object is made, as it is only when the juxtaposition of materials is distinctly odd that we are shocked into an awareness of the underlying technology.³⁸ At times the resulting discomfort is due to an unusual use of material or left intentionally unrefined has the potential to prompt a re-examination of conditions under which work is produced. Additionally, any attention brought forth through the resulting product may result in the reconsideration of materiality from a decentered position, a shift in perspective that may generate shifts in design discourse and production-

Whether designer-makers intend to provoke visceral reactions from the viewer or user through the explicit presentation of materials and processes of production, is not of concern in this paper; given access to resources needed to self-produce, and the control over expression that small batch production permits, it will be assumed here that any features in the finished work are intentionally left for the viewer's consideration. In such work, the independent exploration and research of materials and processes appear to be a considerable priority. The implication is that the designer-maker, through research and self-production, has the means to pursue ideas independently from the conventional format of design by committee, and from the economics of mass manufacturing. In the case of Studio SWINE, conventional concerns such as design or seating are incidental within the relative scope of concerns expressed by the designer-makers. In their own description, Studio SWINE is committed to "[m]aking extraordinary projects around the world, which examine[s] the role of design in the modern day, the power of the vernacular and the future of resources in luxury design... research-led design that is the

³⁸ Miller,16.

product of a region, its culture and resources, regarding design as a tool for place-making in a globalizing world.”³⁹ As such, these objects are contingent on the conditions of their fabrication; viewed as artefacts, they can be used as material evidence reflecting shifts in contemporary cultural production.

This shift is, among many other aspects, toward a tendency to consciously create value for unusual or more obscure material resources, in the form of re-purposed after-market refuse, for example, such as the “fished” ocean plastics used for *Sea Chairs*, material expressions of the designer-makers concerted use of recyclable material (such as plastic bottles and aluminum cans) discarded en masse. The designer-makers provide a sense of human scale to the economy of waste, and material value to the otherwise valueless waste product, through sourcing the material in marginalized locations (such as the deep sea, and impoverished districts such as the favelas in Brazil or shanty towns in South Africa) and making in situ. This vernacular making is contingent on the consideration and use of material resources collected locally and shaped in different ways, according to need. What making occurs within individual locations appears as an expression of the everyday conditions found there. For example, design group *Fabrica* from Guatemala City, inspired by their love of street football (soccer) repurposed sofa mattress springs and “guaipe” (cotton rags from the local textile industry), to create a series of soccer ball-shaped stools wrapped in yarn (named *Seat Ball*).⁴⁰

In post-industrial countries this model, and the correlative need to use locally sourced materials is arguably obsolete. This kind of repurposing/upcycling of industrial/consumer waste is a hallmark of developing economies; bags made out of juice-boxes, lightbulbs made of discarded plastic water bottles, and so forth. Designer-

³⁹ See: www.studioswine.com/about/

⁴⁰ See: www.fabricaatguatemala.com/#!az-awards-2013/photostackergallery7=3.

makers have shown an increasing interest in just these materials, or rather in an explicit engagement with the waste materials of industrial society: industrial by-products, organic synthetics, “up-cycled” composites, and re-purposed discarded or after-market objects. This material waste is typically disconnected from its origin, and transformed in varying degrees, from industrial waste to new desirable forms; recalling a (new) material vernacular, the industrial waste is identified, and the role of the designer in re-shaping it, are present to the viewer at the same time. In the case of the *Sea Chairs*, they are also labeled with a set of geographical coordinates, pinpointing provenance - a means of attributing value that intentionally references the typical manufacturer’s label indicating the country of manufacture. In this instance, I suggest, the designer-makers’ means of production and the character of the materials skew the preciousness of materiality typically associated with fine crafts and design.

The *Sea Chair* appears to be an unrefined three-legged stool, with edges that are unfinished and slightly scalloped. The legs – elongated wedges, well defined yet wavy – are secured simply to the seat using bronze-hued screws. The seat shape is roundish, with the top and bottom edges fairly flat and level, but with a profile looking like a filling slightly oozing out from between two uniform layers. It is black in colour, with the occasional contrasting colour unevenly marbled through. Overall, the features are very basic, and describe a form of seating both familiar and broadly universal. One might even surmise from the rudimentary design and finish that little manual skill was required in the making of the component parts and assembly. There is no use of advanced joinery techniques or special flourishes. The stool, strangely compelling with its tapered legs and lightly undulating contours, appears to sit lightly on the surface. Beyond this, as a device for sitting it is fairly unremarkable – that is, until one spots the round, uneven label,

carefully tied to a leg with nylon rope using a nautical knot. The label's text is simple and austere, declaring "Sea Chair", a set of coordinates (50.2623 N, 5.2368 W), and a series number (0 0-1). The nylon rope, nautical knot, title, and geographical coordinates are contextualized, but questions remain about how they are connected to the stools themselves. Has this piece been fished out from the sea, its location carefully charted?

In certain specific ways, the answer to this question is yes: the first *Sea Chair* was created using found plastic debris that had washed up on a beach in Cornwall, England. The stool reveals little physical evidence to suggest that the designers had a physical role in the actual hand-making, which, with the exception of the legs attached with screws, and a rough label affixed with knotted rope, appears to have been cast from a rudimentary mold, a process mostly associated with basic industrial production processes. However the studio's website offers a narrative of the *Sea Chair's* evolution by means of two short videos.⁴¹ The viewer learns that, using a mobile plastic extruder (Fig.2) of their design and making, the designer-makers made the product on site, at the beach itself where the sea-plastic was found. The geographical coordinates placed on their products' labels firmly confirm that each object produced is inherently unique, thus situating and contextualizing their material and labour-value within the frame of the designer-maker movement and the production of fine design goods.

⁴¹ See: www.studioswine.com/film/



Figure 2 Murakami and Groves with the mobile plastic extruder. Image permission courtesy of Studio

The form of the first *Sea Chair* was shaped from molten plastic poured into molds made from materials found on the beach in Cornwall: the seat from two boards (sandwiched together to press the softened plastic into a disc) and the legs shaped into strips of metal trim. In the next phase of this process of experimentation the designer-makers boarded a fishing trawler with a modified design of the original extruder, but have maintained the use of the improvised molds for the form. Incidental plastic debris collected from fishing nets was sorted by size and colour. The designer-makers time at sea provided enough plastic to create more *Sea Chairs*, each labeled with their respective coordinates. The rough aesthetic is thus appropriate to the conditions in which it was made. One can imagine the stool saturated with sea salt and boasting that distinctive smell of the sea, yet the manufacture is recent; the age value bestowed evoked through these qualities is misleading. Like furniture made from reclaimed and re-milled barn boards, which found in their original state would undoubtedly possess equally evocative smells, the *Sea Chairs* have been stripped of olfactory markers of origin; as in the barn-board table, however, the retention of this origin in other material signs, and conferred with the narrative providing provenance, are augmented in value due to their new status as both 'authentic' and 'designed' objects.

The *Sea Chair*'s authenticity (that is the status conferred on the stool as hand made by the designer-maker) is further augmented through the videos providing visual narration for the collection of the materials, on the beach and at sea, which operate as extensions to the pieces produced. Time is manipulated in these videos, as the series of images are pieced together in a loosely constructed narrative sequence about the process of making a stool, interwoven with images of fishing activities. The ephemeral images provide some temporal context, but the activities— fishing and collecting plastic - occur

slowly, subject to the pace at which the sea provides them: the object and its makers are therefore placed in the rugged and difficult conditions in which the fisherman featured in the videos typically earn their living. The designer-makers, having chosen this decelerated and haphazard means of production, here negotiate a position against limitlessness on the viewer's behalf; highlighting a reality that is so removed from most of our own daily experiences that we are drawn in and engaged by the narrative shown in the images, though we will never gain a full sense of the scope of the actual conditions shown. Set against the mosaic of images – fish drawn from the nets, the fisherman, and the weather conditions at sea – the material value becomes an integral part of the meaning burnished into the *Sea Chairs*.

Through the use of basic foundry processes whose fundamental workings (using heat to melt and reshape raw materials) have changed little over centuries, Murakami and Groves quietly operate as itinerant design researchers, immersing themselves in unglamorous (and at times dangerous) conditions. Themselves products of a mobile global culture, the designers' process participates in a subverted globalized production model, one in which they are directly implicated. In addition to the *Sea Chair* series, the studio has another ongoing project called *Can City*, created for use by “catadores” (waste collectors) in Sao Paulo to smelt and make the aluminum cans they collect into products they can sell. The customized smelter is mounted on a cart, resembling the collection system already in use, and stools are created on site, in a simple tray filled with sand and imprinted with a found object with a pronounced form and texture, such as a square of aligned bricks, to create a seat and legs. “ We looked at the way they (*catadores*) worked, the materials they collected, and how we could learn from them to create a new model of manufacturing,” explained Murakami and Groves,

[T]aking waste materials that could be readily found, to manufacture goods on the street, with the potential to make livelihoods extend beyond rubbish collection. The world is becoming increasingly more globalized, something that we are interested in is how design can help retain a strong regional identity... We wanted to tap into this existing street culture - to turn a public space into a manufacturing line. We went around the streets collecting things we can cast. Mining the city for materials, the perception of the city changes, where once you saw rubbish, now you can see resources to be transformed into new products.⁴²

The tactility and form of the *Sea Chair* indicates something more than authorship or an abstracted sense of provenance: it speaks to the material value of the collected plastic debris as an unexpected resource, and the labour value of sourcing it. The cost of production - the added labour value through the risk incurred from resourcing the materials on open seas to the designer-makers' transformation of detritus into a luxury product – creates a statement with symbolic value. The plastic waste collected by the designer-makers, and re-shaped in the form of a luxury item, is thus re-contextualized for the viewer. Something of its added value comes as well from its providing insight into a system that is never directly experienced. As Jean Baudrillard writes in *The System of Objects*, “Technology encapsulates earlier gestures, invents new ones, and contributes to man’s ‘spectacular alienation’ from his (technical) objects. His gestures haven’t been replaced, but have been split up which creates an abstraction from analogy (symbolic) relationship.”⁴³ It is here that the designer-maker is positioned, in the midst of this binary, traversing back and forth between both “sides” while consistently navigating shifts in technology, while maintaining hand-making skills and an experimental knowledge, through individual process about how things work.

⁴² Azusa Murakami and Alexander Groves, accessed August 31, 2015, www.studioswine.com/can-city/.

⁴³ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (1968) (Verso, 2006), 52.

Studio Swine's short documentaries found on their website (also available on Vimeo⁴⁴) highlight the process as means to the end, a way of bringing meaning to what Martin Heidegger termed "distancelessness"; for Heidegger, as distances between things (physical or conceptual distances) are abolished, "everything gets lumped together into uniform distancelessness" and bring no more understanding of the things that present themselves to us.⁴⁵ In the case of the *Sea Chairs*, materiality and labour value are foregrounded, whereas in Somers' series these were literally masked. Working in direct collaboration with local industries, as do Murakami and Groves, is characteristic of current designer-makers exploring uses for industrial by-products, or alternative uses for existing modes of production.

Recognizing a need to facilitate these collaborations, organizations such as M+Dc (Manufactures and Designers Connect) in Toronto (Ontario) and Makers Row in New York City (New York), help directly link designers interested in small batch production with local manufacturers and builders. The intent in facilitating direct collaboration between designers and manufacturers, is to give designers a 'feel' for manufacturing processes, with the hope that they will subsequently design with these in mind, thus eliminating the costly process of repeat prototyping. When the partnership works, in addition to gaining access to existing tools, machinery or material resources, designer-makers acquire firsthand knowledge of materiality and processes which in turn are meant to offer a methodological and economic advantage over their designer-counterparts separated from modes of production; it also means that for these designer-

⁴⁴ See: <https://vimeo.com/58461689>

⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, "The Thing" (1950), in Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins, eds. *The Object Reader*. (Routledge 2009), 114.

makers, production is not contingent on access to manufacturers through established design firms.

In October 2014, Studio SWINE received enough crowd-funded support for a trip aboard a schooner with a team of scientists specializing in the ocean gyre garbage patches. Again, modifying the plastic extruder so that it can be taken on board for use on the boat, the extruder re-design includes a parabolic mirror to capture solar power.⁴⁶ The unit is designed and built (again by the designer-makers) to the space available and possible conditions met in production on board the sailing vessel. In addition to these transformed production methods, in the case of Studio SWINE the designer-makers question design from the singular perspective of form, which typically overlooks the context in which it is designed and made and the designer's responsibility in the process. Mainstream design discourse, focused on the singular author and the finished product, misses a significant part of the design and manufacturing process. Products function as surrogates for the designers themselves, and as acclaimed place-markers in the genealogy of the designer's career, distorting the perception of what design is for the consumer, the viewer, and the designers themselves, as well as for the (mostly anonymous) labourers who produce these objects. The designer-maker process, by contrast, seeks to disclose these processes, and materiality, via statements and by the character of the objects themselves.

It is important here to note the implications of another new technology on 'hand-made' design: at the moment this paper is being written, twenty-five versions of affordable desktop 3-D printers are available for purchase. The implication of this technology, its democratizing promise, is that access to a 3D printer can potentially make

⁴⁶ See: www.studioswine.com/gyrecraft

anyone a “maker”. However, I hold that merely inputting a template or design specifications into CAD software does not a “designer-maker” make. The use of computers and rapid prototyping does yield useful results for the investigation of form in small-scale reproductions or for small batch productions of modular components such as plastic joinery. It can also be argued that the control and observation this technology offers the user leads to added appreciation of production processes, with the benefit of agency offered by the so-called democratization of manufacturing. I argue, however, that although the production of “printed” components is useful for the beneficial applications it offers (prosthetics, for example), the technology simply represents another form for industrial manufacturing. On a large scale, the process simplifies and reduces the cost of production, due to the precise mapping of forms enabled through CAD. With the reduction of certain steps, yet with an increase in complexity and precision of forms, the economics of mass manufacturing are vastly improved. This foregrounds the need for industrial designers to be more critical of their own positions, and the processes they use; many of the items produced using 3-D printers are impossibly intricate, describing an overt and total use of CNC machining, with even fewer clues to be found (seams, or texture) about how (and of what) they are made. Though this complexity is undeniably impressive and compelling, the exclusive use of the technology produces a quality that is recognizably rigid and homogenized, alien and impenetrable – qualities that are not those of the designer-maker object, but rather that of Risatti’s ‘limitlessness.’



Figure 3 *Bench*, 2012. Image courtesy of MischerTraxler

II. Case Study 2: *The Idea of a Tree Recorder (or, Recorder One)* by Mischer'Traxler (Katharina Mischer and Thomas Traxler)

An earthy green object sits slightly raised on simple wood treads that are stained a sienna colour. A well-defined rectangular form with rounded corners; its appearance is softened by graduated colour striations and by the soft textured surface of the object. On closer examination, the colour ranges in tonality starting from the left hand side of the form, from a deep olive green to seemingly random variances of avocado and pale leafy green; as the eye moves towards the right, we are back to the deeper tones in an irregular pattern of fine striping. A three-quarter view reveals an empty end and a voluminous interior with a smoother surface and edges. The surface is also irregular, as a profile view of the piece reveals graduated height variations, which – in combination with the varying colour tones – gives the impression of a topographical landscape, its layers rendered in an artist's watercolours. Variances in thickness can also now be observed on the outer surface, with the darkest green sections revealed as the thinnest areas, and the lightest in colour as the thickest. The inner surface is, however, completely level. The regular quality of aligned thread describes the texture of a machine-made object. The object recalls pre-industrial textile making process as the masses of heavy thread tautly wrapped in very orderly rows look like the work of an expressive spinner at a skein winder. In the bottom right-hand edge is a leather label, stamped with the following: “by ‘recorder one’, made in Vienna on 14 August, 2009, mischer'traxler” (Fig. 3). On the designer-makers' website, the name of the product – *Bench* – describes a form-type and intended function.

From Mischer'Traxler's website we also learn that *Bench* is produced using “Recorder One”, designed and built by the designer-makers as a mobile winding

machine, which may be used in any outdoor location. *Recorder One* is composed of a large metal frame with wheels and a handle at one end so that it can be moved, much like a wheelbarrow or mobile market kiosk. The frame supports several moving parts but their arrangement seems fairly straightforward: a platform, supported by pulleys and a counter weight, holds a large bobbin of untreated recycled cotton thread, which is steadily pulled through a reservoir holding a dye bath and a glue bath. This whole moves unevenly at a pace regulated by the sunlight, slowly from bottom to top, while distributing the treated thread onto a plastic form, which rotates on a vertical axis. The form itself can be removed from the axle, and is made up of simple parts that are disassembled once the object has dried. Mischer' Traxler have devised two different shapes, one rectangular and the other more conical, to make a variety of products based on the shapes, such as lampshades and vessels. A panel of solar cells sits next to the machine, drawing energy to power the mechanized unit (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. *Recorder One* Travel Machine. Image courtesy of MischerTraxler

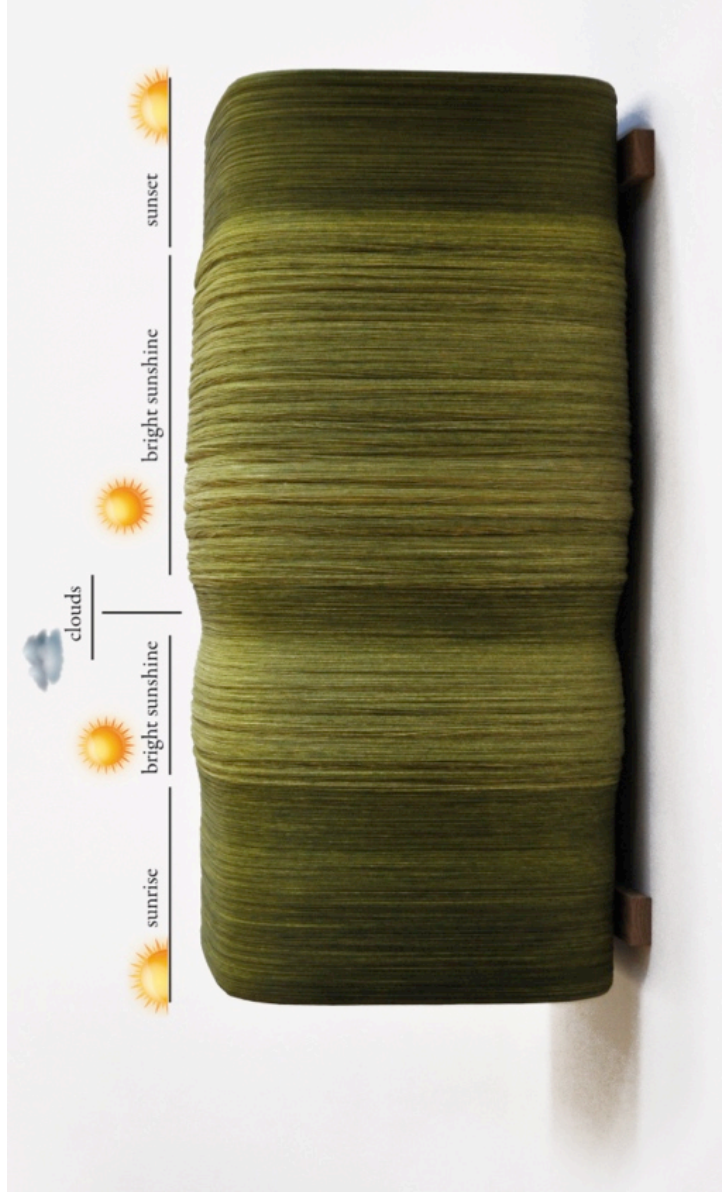


Figure 5. *Bench*; detail of recorded gradients. Image courtesy of MischerTraxler

The designer-makers intervene in this process to perform daily maintenance on the device, to move it into position and reload the thread spool and dye bath. Once an object has dried Mischer and Traxler remove it from the mold and finish it by hand. Within this narrative, the finished product appears somewhat as an incidental by-product of the process of making. As stated by Mischer' Traxler, the objects are recordings of their own process of creation.⁴⁷ The walls of the objects produced do not describe an ideally conceived form, but rather actual meteorological data acquired daily from a particular site. As intended by the designer-makers, the variances in thicknesses of the applied thread and colour nuances function as recordings of the environmental conditions of that day, informing the size, weight and colour of each object – much like how a tree grows over the course of its lifetime. The length of the day, determined by the season and geographical positioning of the recorder determines the overall length, and variations in colour tonality and thickness of thread distributed. Characteristics of each object are the result of external factors, defined by a sort of vernacular specific to the geographic location where they are produced, with the resulting aesthetics and dimensions determined by the environmental conditions on site (Fig.5). Thus, each object is truly unique, the environmental conditions determining the aesthetic outcome of each piece, leaving the finishing to the designer-makers: resin (a hardener) is applied, and a leather label, stamped with geographical coordinates and date of production, affixed to the right hand end of each piece.

The leather stamp is a familiar addition to a garment or other designed object that now denotes a form of authenticity imparted onto the object. Signifying permanence, ruggedness and timelessness, stamped into clay or leather, or seared onto wood, it is a

⁴⁷ See: www.mischertraxler.com/projects_the_idea_of_a_tree_recorder_one

way of authenticating an object, which is meant to be irreversible. The permanence of this is in itself meaningful as the viewer is asked to buy into the history and iconography implied by the signature or brand. Regardless of whether the stamp appears on a label that is affixed to an object, the value of that stamp is non-transferable and remains the same. Thus what is very apt and poetic, about Mischer'Traxler's use of a stamp to identify an object that is inherently unique, as it was shaped by the environmental conditions through which it was made. Furthermore, the identification of the date and geographical coordinates also stamped onto the label further serve to impart a sense of authentication through the implication of the making is located temporally and geographically. The objects then become irrefutably significant in that they are physical artefacts of their recorded surroundings.

Whereas in SWINE's *Sea Chair* and *Can City* projects the material used is different for every product made, in Mischer'Traxler's *The Idea of a Tree Recorder*, the 'vernacular' is a data imprint, and aesthetics are inherent to the weather and seasonal conditions where the products are produced. The labour value and material value are dependent on the amount of daylight available on location, also ensuring the unlikelihood of exact duplication in the objects of the series. In this reconsidered vernacular and the individuality of each object, one finds similarities to craft practices; but the project's inherent use of industrial production methods, specifically machine-driven serial production, that the practices find their roots in design. The value of a project such as the *Recorder One* series is in what it reveals about the unsustainable pace of mass manufacturing, and its suggestion of a compromise solution based in nature's rhythms. The production of each object, activated and contingent on energy resources almost entirely independent of the designer-makers' intervening, becomes a statement about the

alienated quality of limitlessness in design that comes more from the project itself more than its finished products.

It is my contention that the social ideological and cultural value of the designer-made object lies in providing a critical counter-point to mass production. Calling their process “industrialized locality”⁴⁸, Mischer’Traxler investigates how serial production might become synchronized with natural rhythms, hoping to inspire manufacturers to adopt similar strategies. One object is made per day, as production is contingent on the amount and intensity of available sunlight drawn into the solar cells that power the rotation and mechanized platform. When the sun is at its strongest, the winding form accelerates, leaving little time for the thread to soak in the dye bath, resulting in the thread becoming layered more thickly over areas corresponding to those environmental conditions. Mischer’Traxler intended to create a machine that mimics an industrial process though with mechanized workings and an energy resource regulated by the amount of daylight hours. Production that is slowed down to such an indeterminately regulated pace recalls early industrial manufacturing, wherein the skills of human labourers and environmental conditions such as limited available daylight hours in which one could work, determined doing their work, the speed and quantity of production, to a much larger extent than now. In executing their tasks, the designer-makers are engaged in anonymous workmanship. As such the outcome of the overlapping and blending of what are normally very distinct roles in industrial production (designer + manufacturer + machinist + material = product) is a position closely resembling the functions typically undertaken by a craftsperson. Thus variances and blurring of formerly predefined

⁴⁸ Katharina Mischer and Thomas Traxler, accessed August 31, 2015, [www.mischertraxler.com/projects the idea of a tree recorder one](http://www.mischertraxler.com/projects_the_idea_of_a_tree_recorder_one).

occupational outlines, and the difficulty in describing and pinpointing exactly what position a designer-maker occupies in cultural and economic production, foreground the effacement of a master narrative (and the temporal and environmental as positions) in making.

In their search for alternative materials, sources of energy and production strategies, Mischer'Traxler have also explored sensor technology and kinetics – in consequence they created a series of work that is a fascinating synthesis of consumers as collaborators with technology, with energy needed for production supplied directly from attention and movement provided by the viewer. The designer-makers' wanted to subvert the viewer's role as an active participant in the creation of a product: the product's consumption occurs first through its creation, as the consumer-as-viewer or catalyst forcibly becomes engaged with the machinations of production, as part of the machine themselves.⁴⁹ Like Studio SWINE, Mischer'Traxler discloses process and materiality through videos available online. Mischer'Traxler's recordings are presented in time-lapse rather than the montage of *Sea Chair*'s accompanying videos, and there is an air of an instructional or demonstration recording that is straightforward and without pretense, removing the idealistic narrative that typically masks design processes. To take but one example, we might compare Mischer'Traxler's recorded process to the polished promotional clip produced for design duo Bouroullec's *Vegetal* chair, manufactured by Vitra, which eludes to the production process through a whimsical animation of their concept drawings. These drawings develop seamlessly in a vine-like growth to the finished product, with any suggestion of 'making' or production process (such as meetings with the manufacturer and repeat prototyping by factory craftspeople), entirely

⁴⁹ See: www.mischertraxler.com/projects_collective_works.html

elided – or equated entirely to the act of ‘design.’⁵⁰ The viewer is led to believe that the plastic chairs “grow” in an innocuous way, from the designer’s drawings. Though the piece describes an organic production process, the actual production of the series is anonymous and constrained by the economics of mass-reproducibility.

In all of the videos discussed, the authorship of the objects featured is intentionally questioned as the designers and designer-makers are not themselves present. The narratives are different to the often-romanticized type used to illustrate the making of a hand made object. These typically follow the maker, often closely and reverently framing the maker’s hands at work. The form of narrative that portrays the craftsperson (often as a gnarled figure working in solitude) as ennobled: the work undertaken by craftspeople is difficult, culturally significant, and often times undervalued. Films, videos and televised series, such as Jacques Demy’s 1956 short film, *Le sabotier du Val de Loire*⁵¹, and the more recent (2015) BBC 4 series directed by Ian Denyer, *Handmade*⁵² (a three-part series presented without voiceover, music, or dialogue), focus entirely on the crafts process, intended to highlight the implications of labour value in crafts. However the crafts processes featured are typically those which were first shaped centuries ago, and associated with what Risatti calls “utilitarian” or “production” crafts: that is the making of objects that were intended to meet a functional need in the everyday.⁵³

The focus on labour value is one of the hallmarks of the designer-maker strategy, as it is for other contemporary “slow” movements. Yet the Mischer’Traxler and SWINE’s videos also highlight something that is absent from narrative within the

⁵⁰ See: www.vitra.com/en-jp/product/vegetal

⁵¹ Jacques Demy, *Le sabotier du Val de Loire*, fiction, written/directed by Jacques Demy (1956, France, Pathé-Cinéma), short film.

⁵² BBC Four, *Handmade*, documentary series, directed by Ian Denyer (2015, British Broadcasting Corporation), television.

⁵³ Risatti, 304.

familiar imagery: that is the implications of making within a contemporary context. The designer-makers are shown as physically engaged with mechanized instruments, thus the process of laborious and time-intensive hand shaping is not a focus. Instead the shaping of the forms is achieved through highly mechanized, industrial-like processes followed by the implementation of final steps such as hand finishing. Here is the difference that suggests a possible boundary (albeit a tenuous one) between designer-maker processes and crafts.



Figure 6 *Chinese Stools - Made in China copied by the Dutch*, 2007. Image permission courtesy of Studio Somers

IV. Case Study 3: *Chinese Stools - Made in China copied by Dutch* by Studio Somers (Wieki Somers and Dylan van den Berg)

Studio Somers' *Chinese Stools* series, created through the adoption of makeshift seating made by Chinese street vendors illustrates an important instance early in the millennium, where designers produced their work independently from homogenized mass-reproducible processes. Though Somers herself self-identifies as a designer, rather than a designer-maker, the work produced in partnership with Dylan van den Berg serves as a valuable illustration of the difficulty of engaging taxonomies through the flux of cross-disciplinary research and practice as identified by Walker, Adamson and Bell. From a distance, the series of objects appear as a bright red array of differentiated amorphous forms, that on closer inspection reveal themselves as unusually proportioned seating. Each objects' essential structure describes its intended use at a fundamental level, describing objects that are chair- or stool-"like". Composed of a motley assembly of parts and binding materials, their surface textures suggest revealing details: seats, for example, that appear to be made entirely of cardboard bound by duct tape, an amateur handyman's solution pushed to excess. Their unifying red colour is opaque and lustrous, with any trace of original colour from the underlying materials thoroughly masked under this candy-like coating.

In collaboration with partner Dylan van den Berg, product designer Wieki Somers spent one month during 2007 in Beijing, China, for what was called the 'Entity Identity' project. Here they worked with the expertise of Chinese craftsmen in their workshops to create products inspired by the metropolis. Somers has spoken at length about the experience, and describes the inspiration and process for the *Chinese Stools* series:

As a response to the extremely fast growing metropolis, in which everything seems temporary, I focused on the small things of daily street life...In Beijing we found customized seats used by people such as security guards, street vendors and rickshaw drivers. These ancient chairs were often barely recognizable, having undergone so many improvised repairs and modifications. I was struck by the many charming details, which connect the diverse materials and parts and link them to their respective makers. The stools... testify of a long history in which both the maker and the user have left their traces. When I started to purchase some of these stools... I became acquainted with the many stories attached to them. Finally I decided to cast a few stools in aluminum. The original stools vanished in the process, but in this way I could preserve their memory from the ravages of time and pay homage to their makers in the meantime.⁵⁴

As Somers explained, her interest was primarily about how these stools originally came into existence and how they functioned primarily in the everyday: she wanted to know how they were made originally (and maintained) by their original users, not through a calculated design process but out of necessity. Their activity, and the resulting stools, speaks to the essential problem of designing a chair – an exercise often assigned to furniture, industrial and product-design students at an early stage of their educations, the desired outcome of which is not so much to improve the chair's aesthetics, as to get students to understand its most fundamental function. The 'designers' of the *Chinese Stools* – rickshaw drivers, market stall vendors and so forth – though untutored in design, had in Somers' eyes fully understood this underlying principle not through a directed exercise but through experimentation shaped by function, observation, and materials available to hand.

Somers' intentions, as a Westerner looking to find inspiration and drawing it from "elsewhere", suggests a negative response to the conditions of "limitless-ness," in grasping onto other sites and other forms of making, informed instead by tactility and the human dimension [you might acknowledge here that in another way this just repeats

⁵⁴ Studio Somers, accessed August 31, 2015, www.wiekisomers.com/#.

centuries of western artists/thinkers looking for an escape from Western civilization in an exoticised vision of the East as other?] In interviews about the series Somers refers to the original seats as “cherished” by their owners. This is a bit of a misnomer (it implies a heirloom, gift, sentimental attachment), since she also spoke about how neighbors, discovering that she was buying a neighbor’s stool, immediately asked if she would buy theirs. But it does point to what Somers identified as significant in these objects – that they were the acknowledged personal property of these users, integral to their everyday activities. Somers often references the body, as well as overlooked objects and everyday activities ritualized through routine, using these objects in conjunction with materials chosen for their symbolic connotations. For example, she has created a small series of teapots cast from a modified pig’s skull, with an accompanying rat-fur cozy. Other designs are not as unsettling; Studio Somers first gained attention for *Boat Bath*, a whimsical and beautifully crafted row-boat-shaped bathtub with an enamel inner lining.

Somers looks to the narrative qualities that vernacular making often possesses: for example, the tactile diversity of the original materials used to make each chair provides the narrative of their making, but are effectively homogenized in the cast series. The material and labour value, materials used that were available at hand, and the time taken to create the thing, in its second (or indeed perhaps third, fourth, fifth, and so on) incarnation, have been rendered as one uniform material. What were once seams, textures, colours and parts of the stools, are now only implied. A description of the casting process reveals that not only has the material quality of the stools been irrevocably altered, but their function also has, as they are no longer as malleable as their appearance may have originally suggested. Instead, they are metallic (and likely cold to the touch), hard and hollow. As Somers describes the process: “A silicone mould was

made of the original chair, which was burnt away. This was then filled with beeswax, and a plaster mould was made of the wax chair. Hot aluminum was poured in to make the final piece.”⁵⁵ Finally, the stools saw an application of uniform and opaque colours.

A question is raised with regards to the materiality of the original Chinese stools: what happens to the character of these stools as heavily used, everyday objects, when their materiality is thus transformed? Would the stools have had the same marketable appeal as her other work, had they been left in their original state? Presumably the random and reclaimed materials used to make them would be too uncomfortably close to the “real”, as after years of use they would most certainly be dirty, the tape softened and its edges frayed and worn. The association with street markets, pollution and grime, and long hours of toil, not only speak of the reality of the labourer’s working conditions, but of the body itself and its impregnation into the seat. From this perspective, the use of the candy-coated aesthetic seems to now serve as a masking device, with the intent to make the stools palatable through this aestheticized (or anesthetized) treatment. This masking remains a dominant feature of the series as it now exists; Somers’ intent was to translate but in some way preserve the original narrative qualities of these stools, however they are in effect effaced through the incineration of the originals and the castings being integrated into a plastic sphere. Emphasizing aesthetics over the conditions under which the objects were made and used, removes a necessary part of function. The stools existed as examples of human capabilities as labourers and makers, and as highlighted by Somers, as examples of human ingenuity and resourcefulness. At the same time, it is problematic to see her “Chinese Stools” as inauthentic variants of an authentic original; although the individuals who made them no doubt were resourceful and clever, focusing

⁵⁵ See: www.dezeen.com/2007/12/11/chinese-stools-by-wieke-somers

on these qualities romanticizes these objects beyond their original function, as well as the conditions in which they were produced.

We learn from Somers' description of her process that the casts are empty. The incineration of the originals is a by-product of the process used. Thus the casting of the stools effectively creates an imprint of the thing, functioning much like fossilized remains, or forms captured in clay where the thing making the expression is long gone. Presumably the original stools morphed and grew over time and prolonged use, as parts need fixing or replacing new layers or parts were added, a process that yielded many iterations of the same form. Thus the potential for the stools to avoid a single fixed form, and rather be living objects in an ongoing process of transformation, no longer exists, as the stools' forms are frozen through Somers' process. Somers is partially correct in stating that the casting stops the ravages of time; however, in the process the originals are also destroyed and the casts incomplete versions of their originals (they are missing the many layers of materials used necessitated through the many years of modifications). Thus as copies the stools become something new, with the potential to become part of a standardized reproducible series.

In adopting/adapting these pieces Somers effectively fetishizes the stools, casting them in aluminum further transforming their value from use-value to symbolic value. This takes place in two ways. First, by having encased them, and second, by having them displayed for a commercial market. Admittedly, without the opportunity to experience the series in person, it is difficult to establish their use value, to determine whether the stools function effectively as seats. In fairness, one seat does stand out as a contender for adequate "seatability", but otherwise it is safe to assume that the stools are not as usable as their originals were, due to the materiality (hard aluminum) and the rigid unevenness

of their surfaces. Though the *Chinese Stools* collection is intended as a one-of-a-kind series, as casts of original objects they function as partial reproductions: the destruction of the original stools, and their replication in cast, “new” objects, recreates the fracture between the labourer and the designer typical in mass reproduction processes. In these instances the labourer fulfills the role of anonymous maker, often creating the template and the subsequent multiples off of its mold, under the designer’s creative direction.

If one considers the aesthetics and elegant form of more coveted Chinese wood stools, Somers’ objects resembling stools provide a dramatic contrast and an interesting point of comparison between traditional forms of craft making and contemporary forms. In resistance to the condition of limitless-ness, what the designer asks the viewer to consider is not exclusively the use value of an object, but its labour value, re-engaged with the narrative that the aesthetic quality represents. With the case of the original *Chinese Stools*, these had functioned as part of a sub-culture of rickshaw drivers, market stall vendors and security guards, essential to a daily economy yet removed from our own direct experiences as viewers of these objects.

V.

For the designer-maker, an obvious benefit of engaging with materials is how their manipulation informs the design and production process, and imparts knowledge of their inherent physical qualities to the object's final form. Making engages a whole other set of skills for designers to use as tools to escape from or intervene in the alienation created by mass-production. Making contributes an embodied knowledge of materiality, which informs the creation of the designer-maker object. The origin of the product is not achieved through an abstracted process, by putting pen to paper (or now fingers to keyboard and mouse), an approach common to mainstream design, but comes through an intimate understanding through the exploration of materials at hand.⁵⁶

Additionally, by explicitly revealing how and with what materials the objects are made, the designer-maker also functions as an agent and documentarian of issues deriving from the outer boundaries of mainstream design and production. Working from the position that the contemporary designer-maker's approach to production is explicitly declared and purposefully based in hand-making and self-production, we can see their work as a register or record/archive of contemporaneous shifts in craft and design discourses. These shifts also move away from the narrative that has persisted about the perceived binary that separates technological progress from hand-making, which Jean Baudrillard identified as the key to the tensions between technological pressures and nostalgic gestures in modernity. Rather than focusing on this binary as counter-productive, designer-maker practices engage (as their moniker suggests) in both sides to provide points for comparison, and to attest to the possibility of occupying the gap between the disciplines as a site of resistance, critique, and potential for change. As

⁵⁶ Miller, 16.

Walker wrote some 25 years ago, for these hyphenated beings, “creativity appears to flourish in the margins.”⁵⁷

The term designer-maker adequately describes an intentional (re) converging of two fields (design and crafts), as an appropriately flexible (if slightly inelegant) term for this polymorphic discipline, whose work processes sometimes elude specific categorizations of craft, industrial, or furniture design. Maintaining a balance between the use of contemporary technologies and hand making, designer-maker practices are evidence of the acceptance and use of this tension created by the binary gap. An increasingly decentered position outside of mass-production supports hand-making activities but critically, not only a simple return to the visceral pleasure derived from hand-making, but also a recognition of designing and making as social undertakings.

The studios - Studio Somers, Studio Swine, and Mischer’Traxler - foreground the steps in industrial production that are typically obscured or overlooked and overt gaps in knowledge, they may appear as very explicit offerings of post-disciplinary processes. However, their activities also spark important questions about design discourse and the designer’s role in production practices, within a larger economy of scale. By comparison, the relative independence of the designer-maker model affords the designer the space to explore and consider design within the social context and implications of its production and for an emergence of critical making in design.

The designer-maker studios discussed here offer evidence for post-disciplinary approaches that consider aspects beyond reifying aesthetics and the status of the designer, the reexamination of the designer as “author”, and the broader implications of exploratory research, hand-making and self-production. With notions of authorship in

⁵⁷ Walker, 26.

question and the knowledge accrued through hand making, what distinguishes the designer-maker from its other design counterparts is ultimately self-reflexivity. The familiar paradigm of the auteur designer is put into question, as designers take up roles typically denied them, engaging not only in research and conceptualization, but in execution and the active sourcing of raw materials. Meeting Walker's call for a design that would resist the homogenized aesthetic of mainstream design from a decentered position, the objects considered here help, on one level, to demystify the act of designing, the role of the designer, and the elevated status of the "designed" object.⁵⁸ At another level it must be acknowledged that these objects still participate in the aura of the designer-as-author: further consideration of how the benefits of the symbolic capital (translatable into real capital) might be translated to benefit anonymous labour remains as a possible direction of inquiry. However, though it is the designer-makers whose names are heralded (for example, it is not the Chinese market-workers, nor the ocean/fishermen, nor the sun and wind, who 'design' these objects) the designer-maker movement represents the potential, I believe, for a genuine move toward design as self-reflexive, critical and relevant, and that appears today as the most potent challenge to design's status quo. Presenting a viable means for designers to pursue values – as studio crafts permit the maker – of philosophical and social interest, a place of critique, and a source of freedom to the maker: that freedom that comes when one can, in Sennett's words, "direct the content, pace and quality of the way one earns one's living".⁵⁹ And here we have a further point to be explored in the designer-maker model, one that unfortunately falls outside the scope of this study. Alongside the critical and interventionist functions of designer-maker practices lies a further motivation for designers to engage in material

⁵⁸ Rock, 55.

⁵⁹ Sennett, 15.

processes of production: the added value of pleasurable activity for the ones who make these objects. As William Morris suggested in a lecture first presented in 1877 as “The Lesser Arts,” if the purpose of the decorative arts (or design) is to give us users pleasure in the things we must use, “...to give people pleasure in the things they must [perforce] make, that is the other use of it...”⁶⁰ Both would be accomplished, Morris said, in a situation where the one designing a thing was also the one making it.

⁶⁰ Gillian Naylor, ed. *William Morris By Himself - Designs and writings* (Little, Brown and Company 1996), 205.

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