EMERGING VIEWS ON MAKING
FIBRE GRADUATES REFLECT ON THEIR PRACTICE

by

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Abstract

This narrative research examines the ways in which craft is conceptualized from the perspective of five recent graduates from the Material Art and Design Fibre Program at a prominent Canadian art and design university. Recognizing the cultural currents that have excised acts of making, including Western de-industrialization and abundant access to offshore labour markets, this research looks at the role of maker within a new societal context. A nascent theoretical platform for craft, shaped by artists and academics, counters a dearth of voices that has characterized the field’s history. Here, craft is posited as a methodology, characterized by embodiment, subjectivity, resistance, and skill. The experience of emerging makers, and their reflection in relation to this theoretical framework, allows for a broader consideration of present-day craft practice, and a renewed consideration of material arts curricula.
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Chapter one: introduction to the study on craft and narrative

Two expansive terms lie at the heart of this research. The first is *craft*. Long established as a noun, craft evokes a mode of making that shakes its fist at industrial production. At once defiant, sacrosanct, and nostalgic, craft mobilizes a legacy of production that operates at the sidelines of capitalism, happily thumbing its nose.¹ As a verb, craft is finding its feet in the currents of a postindustrial world, describing an embodied act of making that permeates many spheres of creative practice, from sculpture to interior design to winemaking. How new makers situate themselves within the experience, legacy, and language of craft is the focal point of this research.

The second term is *narrative*. It describes the form of this qualitative research as well as the nature of the data it draws upon. The stories of emerging makers disclose a new angle to how craft is conceived, and their very recounting shapes how the skill and material-based knowledge of craft are culturally positioned. Craft as a label emerged in opposition to the industrial practices of the early nineteenth century, and while contemporary practice still uses language that is entrenched in history, the context, tools, and material culture of bodies at work in postindustrial nations demand new narratives.

Making and storytelling do not exist in disparate spheres. They are ubiquitous in daily life, and address the activities within it. They hold a mirror up to who we are and convey who

¹ William Morris railed at the loss of craft mastery by the “thoughtless hacks” who supplanted them.
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we want to be. Craft, in its material form, bears witness to the experience and methods of the maker, yet opens itself to further narratives through time and use. Texts connect to other texts, reflecting a material trace of other conversations. Narrative inquiry offers an inroad to the experience of making, allying itself with its subject in its capacity to summon layers of meaning through time and consideration, permanently imbued with the subjectivity of the maker, yet generously pointing towards new understandings.

A note about language

For the purposes of this research, craft is both a verb and a noun. It denotes the historical conception of craft as a field, characterized by a particular range of products and skills; more commonly, it describes an embodied and skilled approach to making, freed from the specificity of material categorization, though never the material itself. In this second description, craft is synonymous with making or material practice. These terms were used interchangeably throughout this research. Study participants working in their field of practice were called makers, practitioners, or artists. No parameters were applied to the nature of what they made, although all used textile techniques as the central component of their work.

It is important to note that terms have a troublesome past and complicated present in this field. The incendiary role of language has characterized the legacy of craft since it became

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2 This is a key principle in researcher Barbara Czarniawska’s use of narrative analysis, and revisited in Chapter Three: Methodology – narrative analysis.

3 Textile techniques refer to both textile construction and surface design. These include, although are not limited to, knitting, weaving, basketry, feltmaking, printing using block, silkscreen, or digital methods, stitching, and various methods of embellishment.
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a domain worth discussing. Makers may describe their field of practice with assorted and disparate descriptors, commonly including art, design, material arts, conceptual art, and sculpture. While I have yet to meet a self-described artisan, the term has been used by researchers to describe a nascent economy of makers, and, as such, also appears in this research. Within textiles, descriptors grow exponentially to describe a diverse field of functional and conceptual practice, contentiously subsumed under the label of textiles or fibre. This study acknowledged that the terms it adopted may be rebuffed by the very makers it described, yet multiple combinations of descriptors required a common terminology to address them, and it cannot be ignored that the burgeoning body of research occurs within the field labeled as craft. I do not wish my research vocabulary to misrepresent participants or exclude readers. Rather, my desire is to thematically unite some disparate views, always with the proviso that I will never suitably describe many types of practice with a single term.

**summary and research questions**

This qualitative inquiry centred upon the experience of five graduates from the Material Art and Design Fibre Program at a prominent Canadian art and design university, referred to in this study as Canadian Art University (CAU). Using the methods of narrative inquiry, I examined the ways in which they understand the experience of making, and how their postsecondary schooling and early professional practice had shaped this conception. Their reflections were analysed in relation to current theoretical tendencies in the field, which identify the term craft as a methodology promoting embodiment, subjectivity, resistance, and skill. In order to assess whether the perspectives of emerging makers are represented in prevailing theory, it posed the following research questions:
1. How do emerging makers describe their experience of making?

2. How do new makers situate themselves within a language of making?

3. How do the narratives of emerging makers relate to the current theoretical framework of craft that is based upon embodiment, agency, resistance, and skill?

It also considers the following subquestion:

1. Do the narratives of recent graduates point to a reconsideration of material arts curricula?

**background and rationale: a snapshot**

From the mid-nineteenth century theoretical writings of John Ruskin (1905) until the latter decades of the twentieth century, the term craft described a relatively static sphere of practice of applied artists working in specific categories of raw materials, and culturally positioned as a counterpoint to industry. This conception was echoed in post-secondary institutions, which in turn, adopted media-specific nouns to describe program graduates. Students became glassblowers or weavers, for example, following their formal training. Scant theoretical underpinnings, primarily drawn from modernist pioneers inspired by Ruskin’s theorizing, focused on craft’s distinction from, or relationship to, fine art, as well as its ethically-charged social function. Craft became synonymous with virtue, self-determination, and social reform through this enduring ideology, one which took root and remained largely unchallenged in Western institutions.

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4 John Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice* (1851-53) is commonly cited as the founding text for William Morris’ Arts and Crafts movement. Its subject matter of Venetian architecture incorporates links between Gothic architectural details and the moral character of people.

By the late-twentieth century, a static and morally-infused model of craft found itself within a profoundly different context. Two principle shifts in the economic and cultural landscape had pushed the model of craft as noun from archetype to anomaly. First, Western countries moved from an industrialist base towards a postindustrialist one, and entire economic landscapes upon which this conception of craft depended were quickly redefined. Put simply, postindustrialist societies favoured the production of information and services over the manufacturing of goods. The broad demographic change that ensued excised important manufacturing sectors to economically impoverished countries that were willing to compete for the privilege of mass producing everything from car parts to pharmaceuticals for a North American market. With craft’s utilitarian function having long been usurped by ready means of mass production, postindustrialization included the additional step of removing all acts of making, industrial or otherwise, from domestic soil. A parallel move towards adopting the skill sets of knowledge economies fuelled this transformation.

The second key late-millennial shift that changed the playing field of making were the equally sweeping beliefs of postmodernism, shaking the foundation of creative practice.

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6 The term “services” describes the frontline service industry, but also includes the sectors of health, education, research, and government services.

7 Of industrialized nations, the US led the pack, losing an estimated 5.5 million manufacturing jobs between 2000 and 2009, contributing to an industrial labour loss that had already been cut in half over the previous twenty-five years (Snyder, 2010; Bell, 1999). While the Canadian loss has not been as dramatic, in 2008 13% were employed in manufacturing compared to 69% in the service sector, closely in line with American trends.

8 A knowledge economy is characterized by growth within market service industries such as finance, insurance, telecommunications, education, and health (Brinkley, 2006).
Amongst its many ideas, postmodernism advocated for relinquishing artistic disciplinarity, and picking freely from a limitless range of visual art vocabulary. Craft was no longer a walled off domain with an enshrined set of practices, but a discipline in flux, embedded in a range of creative spheres from conceptual art to interior design. Opportunities were matched by obstacles, as a glut of foreign-made commodities and a marketplace that disparaged domestic fabrication became imposing hurdles. As a result, makers who had defined themselves within this field were forced to examine the intent of the handmade object in an entirely unprecedented context (Alfoldy, 2007, p. 101).

While the socio-economic ground had shifted, the discipline-based delivery of craft programs within postsecondary institutions had not, staying relatively unchanged since the Bauhaus era of post-WWI Europe. Present-day rising enrolment reveals the continued relevance of material practice as a mode of making, despite being economically problematic and culturally anomalous. While fixed in their conception of craft instruction, institutions have found themselves challenged to categorize the particularity of craft, commonly opting for the departmental label of design to subsume its hands-on techniques. The updated clinical categorization belies the fact that the intent of all such programs is to fabricate, and reveals a postindustrial tendency to avoid that which evokes manual labour. That craft is produced within college/university departments that commonly preserve its disciplinarity while shunning its vocabulary and disregarding its legacy requires closer consideration. This inquiry sought to understand the experience and intentions of recent graduates within this climate. It also examined the ways in which such experiences and intentions had been shaped by their undergraduate experiences.
purpose of the study

The research was undertaken with three potential beneficial end-uses in mind. First, representing the views of participants allows them to cultivate important reflection around their own creative practice. The field of craft has received an influx of critical attention in recent years, and the surge of voices shaping current craft theory reflects this. The participants in the proposed research were asked to reflect upon their own material practice, consider the language they use to describe their work, examine the key intent of their work, and deliberate on the role of their undergraduate education in shaping their views. Their reflections, and the contextualizing of their experience into a new narrative with others, may lay the seeds for ongoing dialogue.

The second key intent was to expand the theoretical framework of present-day craft practice. Craft theory has drawn increasing attention as acts of fabrication in Western nations represent a territory of renegotiation brought about by the competing domains of globalized labour markets and an emergent grassroots counter-culture movement which reasserts local making. While academics and seasoned artists have had a hand in conceptualizing craft, there is a dearth of voices from those entering the field. New makers are adopting craft practice within an economic, social, and cultural climate that has excised acts of fabrication. This may describe the closure of auto parts plants or the removal of shop classes from school curricula. Near-absent acts of mending, building, and repairing in home environments have been challenged by a budding DIY community, but the opposition is demographically specific. Whether it creates sweeping societal change remains to be seen, given the equally forceful dependence on off-shore production that
stands in opposition. How and why new makers have occupied this field becomes an interesting phenomenon given its exclusion from daily life.

The final goal of this research is to foster critical dialogue around material arts programs within post-secondary institutions. If craft practice is an anomaly within twenty-first century western culture, it is equally so within its institutions of higher learning. Indeed, artist and academic, Ron Shuebrook, ruminated in 2002, “I can only wonder where we will find our own craft historians and theoreticians when no one is educating them” (2002, p. 73). Postmodern and postindustrial currents of thought have exerted considerable influence in the semantics and curricula of art and design institutions, to the extent that such programs reflect the needs of an information economy. This model privileges the notion of a creative class and underscores the ideological gulf separating design from fabrication. The insight of recent graduates may advance critical discourse in this field and stimulate new consideration for curriculum development and categorization within material arts programs.⁹

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this inquiry drew upon current conceptions of craft as “a way of doing things” (Adamson, 2007), and examined the narratives of graduates in the field in relation to this definition. If craft is posited as a methodology, that methodology rests upon notions of embodiment (Adamson, 2007; Metcalf, 2002, 2007; Owen, 2011; The creative class was a term coined by American economist Richard Florida to describe workers from a knowledge economy (see above) as well as those from a “super-creative core” of science, engineering, education, computer programming, research, arts, design, and media.)
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Press, 1995; Stratton & Leemann, 2011), agency (Metcalf, 2007; Neuberg, 2011; Robertson, 2011), resistance (Adamson, 2007; Alfoldy, 2007; Bratich & Brush, 2011; Charny, 2011), and skill (Fariello, 2011; Marx, 1887; Morris, 1888; Pye, 1995; Risatti, 2008). Commonly overlapping, these defining features move craft from a fixed status as a noun and towards a more expansive definition as a verb. In a twenty-first century Western context, this verb pushes against dominant and persuasive currents of thought. It describes a mode of making that rises up against contemporary material culture, epistemology, and aesthetic understanding.

If, as Bruce Metcalf asserts, craft “makes meaning, not just physical things” (2000, p.1), this study examined whether the meaning expressed by recent graduates was reflected in its current theoretical platform. It probed the tension that may exist between craft theory and the stories of emerging makers, as well as underscored and added a new dimension to the areas of overlap.

A roadmap

Chapter two of this thesis addresses the literature that has informed craft theory and the cultural conditions of present-day practice. It spotlights the persuasive and enduring ideas of modernism that have shaped a historical conception of craft alongside present-day cultural currents that have challenged them. Making as both a tactile and corporeal process follows, as does an analysis of literature that addresses material practice within a postindustrial economy.
The methodology and procedures that were used in this study are addressed in chapter three, including the manner in which narrative inquiry was adopted as a research approach. Details regarding site selection, participant recruitment, methods, and my own role in the research are specified in this chapter.

Chapters four to six present the results of the data analysis thematically, dividing them loosely along temporal lines. Chapter four, the experience and language of making, addresses formative making experiences and life trajectories that shaped a participant’s path to postsecondary studies. How the participants describe an embodied approach to making, and the degree to which this approach directs cognition follows this section. Prior to both, an analysis of the ways in which participants use language to describe their practice establishes how they relate to the relevant labels within their field, including the terms they adopt and those they rebuff.

Chapter five, craft in a postindustrial landscape, looks at participants’ post-school experience and the socio-economic context of present-day making. It identifies where participants see obstacles and opportunities, the mode in which they have chosen to communicate with a viewer or consumer, and the ways in which they define their communities of affiliation.

Participants’ experiences of making during their undergraduate years are examined in chapter six, the making of makers. The analysis in this section addresses tensions around disciplinary practice amidst a cultural pull towards the de-disciplinary, as well as participants’ experiences of making within a demanding and fast-paced curriculum.
Finally, this section traces participants’ trajectories of experience from entering undergraduate studies until present day to illuminate key shifts in perspective.

Chapter seven takes a considered second look at the theoretical framework that currently informs the field to see where the analysis of participant narratives either supported, ignored, or exposed particular myths behind cultural conceptions of making. It also turns to the research sub-question that asks how material arts curricula might be reconsidered in light of this analysis. Both sections speak to current cultural and institutional conceptions of making, and look to ways in which craft discourse might be freed from particular ideological confines that stifle it, and towards a more expansive definition of as a mode of knowledge production.
Chapter two: review of related literature

craft and modernity: confronting the disinterested gaze

Craft theory—a late-twentieth century movement spurred by artists and academics—has emerged as a means of addressing the implications of social, economic, and cultural change upon a discipline that has received little critical attention. A range of perspectives begins to explain present-day practice: Embodied work can be viewed as a conscious rejection of a Western worldview that devalues physical labour, according to author and educator Bruce Metcalf (2007). It is, at best, an assertion that “we still live in a body rich in potential” (p. 25), or more extremely, a profound critique of labour alienation, mass production, and global homogenization that dominates our material culture (Alfoldy, 2007, p. 101). Beyond an object’s function, or lack thereof, the physical act of making, the required mastery of specialized techniques, and the direct link between labour and product, have become subversive attributes in a twenty-first century Western context.

To be fair, these attributes were subversive in both a nineteenth and twentieth century context as well, as the notion of craft as anomalous has existed since it distinguished itself as a field. Makers and social theorists railed against mechanized production from the invention of the steam engine onward (Gaskell, 1836, as cited in Adamson 2010; Marx, 1887). A once-craftsman, turned “wretchedly poor” industrial worker, would be condemned to serving the master of a manufacturing aristocracy, cautioned French writer Alexis de Tocqueville (1840). British textile designer and social theorist William Morris became a figurehead for resistors of alleged industrial tyranny. The Arts and Crafts movement, of which he is a founder, attributed British social ills to mechanized production, and advocated widespread moral reclamation through medieval-based craft
production. Both Morris and Ruskin mobilized a legacy of indignation, deeply embedded in the cultural psyche of Western nations, in which human skills and virtue were under fire from the scourge of progress.10

Such widespread anti-industrial ire both hinged on and enshrined the centrality of skill to the definition of craft. Ruskin described craft skill as a balance between practiced technique and considered thought, a term Morris (as cited in Cooke, 2003) described as “conscious intelligence,” one which was wholly separate from “manual toil” (p. 228). Marx’s (1887) assertion that the industrial-era labourer was reduced to “watching the machine with his eyes, and correcting its mistakes with his hands” (p. 71) insisted upon the emancipation of the “workman” from “technical subordination to the machine” (p. 76).

Owing to the term’s anti-Industrial roots, skill intermingled with virtue creating a potent and lasting legacy, one researcher Edward Cooke (2003) refers to as “the long shadow of William Morris” (p. 228). Indeed, maker and theorist David Pye (1978) reflects how this stance has infiltrated late-twentieth century understandings, describing craft as depending upon the “judgement, dexterity and care which the maker exercises as he works” (p. 20).

Theorist Howard Risatti (2007) explains it as “the manipulation of physical material by the skilled, knowing hand” (p. 17) inviting “careful attention” and a “meaningful alternative worldview” (p. 188). While a contemporary practice of making may have diverged significantly from this nostalgic connotation, craft discourse continues to be tied to an altruistic notion of human skill, an alliance of virtue and inimitable manual finesse.

10 Critical writings on craft from the time of Morris onward took up the notion of displacement. In this respect, craft was positioned alongside architecture and “decorative arts” as in binary opposition to “the machinery question” (Samuel, 1977). Marxist views of deskilling, and the dehumanizing effects of industrial labour called for widespread popular resistance (Marx, 1887).
This enduring conception of craft as shrouded in virtue, and a means by which makers mobilize time-honoured skills to resist the scourge of progress, touches on how the role of the artist is constructed in the public imagination (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008). If such views are embedded in “ways of thinking and talking about culture and cultural change” (p. 236), this construction of the maker serves an important purpose. Standing apart from, or resistant to, industrial ills, this model idealizes and freezes a conception of a medieval craftsman [sic], as a romantic counterpoint to technological advancement. In this respect, Adamson (2012) states that although the cultural discourse of craft “is fraudulent and false, it is also doing real cultural work” by providing a means of psychologically coping with the disruption of change. The discourse acts as a bandage “that simultaneously heals a wound and also draws attention to the wound, whether or not there’s a wound there at all” (48:50-49:15).

Importantly, if craft was othered from industrialization, it was equally othered from modernism.\(^\text{11}\) Ignited by coinciding ruptures in dominant cultural discourses, modernism was characterized by a pull towards secularism, rationalism, science, capitalism, and technological advancement. Within visual arts, these pulls grew exponentially to include an embrace of innovation, artistic autonomy, formalism and ocularcentrism, while the authority of art institutions on societal attitudes expanded (Owen, 2005). Craft was culturally understood to be stubbornly planted in idiosyncratic practice: inefficient, unswaying, gendered, local, and impervious to modernist thought. Its exclusion from

\(^{11}\) The period of modernism, while hardly finite, is commonly understood as existing from 1860 to 1970. A broad cultural movement, modernism encompassed many disciplines including visual arts, music, literature and philosophy.
modernist institutions pointed to a near-absent theoretical basis for craft, and an inability to advocate for institutional acceptance as a result. That craft exists as a field of inquiry can be attributed to this period in which its discursive lack was exposed.

Immanuel Kant prophesied the modernist movement in the aesthetic pronouncements found in his seminal *Critique of Judgment* (1790). His promotion of a “disinterested gaze” on the part of the spectator, assessing an artwork on its formal properties—colour, line, plane, mass, composition—as opposed to its expressive ones, and granting the sense of sight supremacy over all other human faculties, forecast the key principles of modern art appreciation. Reverence for pure aesthetic experience hinged on viewer detachment, coolly observing, unswayed by subjective leanings. The craft object, in the eyes of Kant and key modern art critics, was poised to resist such an assessment.12

While excluded from modern art, it would be inaccurate to describe craft as being complacent in this role. Its outsider status sat increasingly uncomfortably with many makers throughout the twentieth century, and became a locus of discourse in its latter decades. The American-borne studio craft movement—a collection of college-educated modernist makers working in material-specific categorizations of glass, ceramics, textiles, metal, and wood—led the pack to have hotly contested boundaries separating art and craft eradicated from the 1960s onwards, as claims to due status dominated craft discourse in

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12 Noted American art critic Clement Greenberg promoted Kant’s formalist views at the height of modernism. In his statement “craft is not art” Greenberg underscored the separation between the two domains of practice, demarcated through their contrasting approaches to function and contingency (Risatti, 2007).
the latter decades of the twentieth century. The movement was fuelled, in part, by the decision to locate craft disciplines within departments of visual arts in order to accommodate the influx of WWII veterans. Such positioning bought about a reconsideration of boundaries separating craft disciplines from painting or sculpture, and promoted a conception of craft that piggy-backed upon their critical understanding. Craft objects were produced by solo makers whose work commonly abandoned utility, or used it simply as a reference point, for consideration as an autonomous art object. The monumental textile works of Lenore Tawney and Claire Zeisler as well as the sculptural installations of blown glass artist Dale Chihuly exemplified this shift into a fine arts domain. In fact, the very physical stance of American ceramicist Peter Voulkos during his chain smoking artmaking performances echoes that of his Abstract Expressionist peers—most notably Jackson Pollock—with whom he shared critical acclaim. Such examples exemplify the cultural conception of artist as genius, plagued with “a unique and temperamental personality” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008, p. 234) to which craft had previously been offered limited access. Notably, this access was contentious—appealing to many within studio craft who embraced its critical and commercial possibilities, and disparaged by visual artists who already had it. Curator Garth Clark (2008) commented that “craft became the only community outside the penitentiary to give its greatest respect to escapees,” (p. 449) referring those lucky enough to gain acceptance into the art world.

13 The studio craft movement grew from craft’s position within post-secondary institutions. While as essentially oppositional to industrialized production as the Arts and Crafts movement, studio craft did not advocate a return to traditional methods, nor did it advocate for the widespread ubiquity of art production. Studio craft was characterized by the centrality of materials, a move towards non-functionality, and commonly autonomous object-making. In this respect, it adopted some of the guiding principles of modernism—an ideology and set of critical beliefs that habitually judged it harshly.
On the whole, North American design colleges and universities were complicit in both shaping and reflecting this deficient view of craft, a stance that has yet to disappear. Through scant historical, theoretical, and practical course offerings, such institutions reinscribe an outsider—even anomalous—status. In turn, institutional disregard perpetuates a fragile theoretical platform in craft theory and scholarship. Positioning craft outside modernist canons is reflected in institutional language that opts to be distanced from the term. Commenting on the university’s preferred descriptor of Material Art and Design, Ron Shuebrook, noted the terminology “clearly reflected some grappling with the implications of language while complicating the possibilities for pertinent historical and theoretical discourse” (2002, p. 71). Notably, CAU does not stand alone in its avoidance of this term. Of the thirty-three post-secondary craft programs listed by the Canadian Craft Federation (CCF), only three use the term *craft* as a program or institutional descriptor.

postmodernity: craft as a flavour of making

Debate that has plagued and stratified the spheres of art, craft, and design has been challenged, although not entirely quashed, by postmodernism, a set of beliefs that shattered notions of high art that transcends the everyday versus low art that doesn’t. Firm lines around disciplines quickly became problematized as artists began to travel more fluidly between previously distinct camps. Materials and processes were more freely appropriated to create hybrid practices, and discussions of *de-disciplinary* or *postdisciplinary* entered the vocabulary of visual culture to describe moving away from a redundant taxonomy.
Within the visual arts, postdisciplinary practice may refer to combining the visual with other forms of knowledge, such as science, anthropology, or technology. Margaret and Christine Wertheim’s *Coral Reef Project*, for example, integrates marine biology, physics, craft and community art in a participatory art and science installation. A postdisciplinary turn may also describe working within previously distinct domains included under the umbrella of visual arts. Canadian artist Lynne Heller’s work combines digital media performance, graphic novels, and sculptural installation. This mode of practice does not represent a decision to mix media as much as it does a mutability of boundaries that were previously fixed, each formerly demarcating separate histories and methodologies.

The field of craft itself can be viewed as a distinct set of disciplines, each requiring training and mastery. Postdisciplinarity, in this context, sidesteps the legacy and entrenched approaches to instruction, freeing emerging makers from “worship[ping] at the altar of the past” (Hickey, 2012). Metcalf (2007) specifies that postdisciplinarity has resulted in the obsolescence of “rigorous instruction,” within a specific skill set, concluding “the crafts as we know them are dead.” This has been countered by an enthusiasm for making by artists who are interested in questioning the fundamental assumptions of traditional boundaries (State of the Union: Contemporary craft in dialogue, 2010). Skills may be acquired on an ad hoc basis or borrowed, without the goal of mastery. One can incorporate glass in a work without becoming a glassblower, or porcelain without becoming a ceramicist. The connotations of the materials will communicate a particular legacy, yet the work will transgress its history and operate outside of disciplinary limits.
Within the umbrella of visual arts, craft’s “embrace of execution” (Fariello, p. 25) and tactile approach to materials became equally attractive to artists in a range of disciplines who saw its conceptual relevance. Art critic Roberta Smith commented that the “dematerialization” within the artworld invited a “rematerialization” later in the century, in which craft played a central role (Fariello & Owen, 2005, p. 32). In the anthology By Hand, authors Shu Hung and Joseph Magliaro refer to “gestures of sincerity” sought by visual artists adopting craft modes of fabrication (2007, p. 12), overtly mining the cultural discourse that embeds the field with virtue, skill, and agency. By emphasizing intimate and laboured acts of making, such artists were not interested in creating craft as much as they were in producing art that touched upon the connotations of craft. The materials and repertoire of techniques offered within the field of craft evoked associations with time, labour, heritage, domesticity, value, and gender that advanced an artwork’s conceptual intent.

Within the dubiously defined sphere of craft, a new emphasis was placed on the field as a source of evocative vocabulary, its heritage and methodology once again mobilized as a counterpoint to efficient and technologically dependent processes. While transgressing disciplinary boundaries may have allowed visual artists to pillage from craft’s repertoire of techniques, it has in no way strengthened craft’s discursive underpinnings. Writer and curator Paula Owen describes the historical precepts of craft as having “more significance than ever. But without a credible and unambiguous theoretical basis, [...] young visual artists remain unaware of their craft antecedents” (2005, p. 33). Recent theorizing emerged, in part, as a reclamation, seeking to redirect a rudderless present through a clearer understanding of the past. Meanwhile, the climate of making is decidedly mixed: Vestiges
of the studio craft movement endure, but do so uncomfortably alongside a waning interest in disciplinarity. The DIY movement has gained momentum, yet its ironic and primarily untaught approach remain situated outside the walls of academia. A meta-narrative for visual culture is long gone, as are boundaries and conventions surrounding mediums, the assumption of ocularcentrism, and the separation of “high” art from “low.” Craft has become valuable fodder for visual artists outside the field, who do it no favours, reinscribing longstanding hierarchical boundaries that serve to isolate it.

The current theoretical position of craft that is used in this study addresses it as a “flavour of making” (Stratton, 2011, para 1) or an embrace of execution (Fariello, 201), rather than referring to a specific range of skills, materials, or objects. In its present incarnation, subjectivity is key, embodiment coming before utility, agency over object. Scholar Suzi Attiwill (2000) suggests that emerging craft theory offers new ways of moving and thinking, freed from the specificity of material categorization. Curator and author Glenn Adamson, supports this premise in Thinking Through Craft (2007) and The Craft Reader (2010), presenting the term as “a way of doing things, not a classification of objects, institutions, or people” (2007, p. 4). As an “approach” or “an attitude,” it is less governed by the specificity of materials and outcome than the process of fabrication. This process asserts the agency of the maker who adopts the approaches of craft as means to think expressively through material practice. Writers Shannon Stratton and Judith Leemann (2011) assert that a technical reading of craft is “the least interesting way to use the word.” Instead, the field provides a means of reflecting back on the maker, and his/her “orientation to time and circumstance” (p. 1).
While such definitions rest on the subjectivity of the maker, craft, importantly, cannot be de-materialized (Metcalf, 2002). The medium may be secondary to the methodology, yet is nonetheless essential to our understanding of a work. Koplos (2002) reminds us that, “in crafts the medium never becomes invisible. It’s not just a means to make some particular point, but is always part of the point” (p. 82). If the other “part of the point” is to reflect on subjectivity, embodied labour, skill, and perhaps the legacy that is communicate through its tools and techniques, a full working definition of craft may in fact embrace an amalgam of methodology and material. While the work may allude to the hand of the maker or to a body in motion, craft depends on its status as both a verb and a noun; it is both a way of making and a manifestation of having made. Current theorizing has allowed aspects of craft fabrication to eclipse the objects themselves, but still necessarily depends on the work culminating in full material form.

**embodied understandings and tacit knowledge**

Current craft theorists have given critical attention to the embodied and emotive aspects of craft. The maker’s process is guided by touch, a rich and layered understanding of method, insistent repetition of movement, and an emphasis on tactile intimacy (Charny, 2011). By extension, the user’s experience is shaped by the weight of a pot in their hands, profound associations with memory and use, the smell of a fabric, or its inimitable drape. Author Janet Koplos (2002) describes the “unexplainable and irresistible experience” of sensual discovery that compels makers towards the “tactile and olfactory and auditory” properties of their medium (p. 82). The viewer, in turn, is invited to participate with an object, according to researcher Paula Owen (2011, p. 86), “neutralizing” the distance between object and viewer, and opening the door to “personal, ephemeral, associative,
and responsive” conversation between the two. Such observations position embodied fabrication as a central concern in assessing the work, and a counterpoint to the long-held modernist conception of aesthetic appreciation (Fariello, 2011; Howes, 2007).

Sensory understandings of craft link closely to the writings of John Dewey (1934) who addresses the conscious experience of artmaking. In the throes of artistic practice “we touch and feel, as we look, we see; as we listen, we hear” (p. 61); both the “doing” of the work and “the perception” of it becoming two facets of the same sentient encounter. Similarly, Elliot Eisner refers to the “dialogic imagination” between the maker and the work, describing the process of creating as an unfolding conversation in which the maker “acts and the work speaks” (2002, p. 116). Self and lived experience are illuminated for the maker in this “spaceless, timeless universe” (p. 202) in which sensory attentiveness is keen and imagination is unencumbered.

Linking the doing of work to a host of affective and sensory experiences established an early basis for considering craft as a mode of knowledge production. John Ruskin (1853) implemented some enduring parameters around assessing the tacit knowledge of craft production might be considered. His writings describe practical skill as incomplete without considered thought, otherwise rendering the maker an “animated tool” (p. 84). Dewey, in turn, suggested “intelligent” activity, depended on concentration and attentive consideration to allow a plan to thoughtfully take shape. The body involved in creative activity does not do so mechanically, but requires a mind that “attends, purposes, cares, notices, and remembers” (1934, p. 275).
Attempts have been made to describe the experience felt by emerging makers, but exist primarily as speculative third-party accounts. Metcalf (2007) writes of students being lured towards the tactile processes of their chosen media, as if the act of fabrication “answers an unarticulated need” (p. 25). This appeal may be haptic in nature, as makers reach beyond the ubiquitous hard plastic “sterility” of their environment and allow their fingers to understand a secreted material world (Potvin, 2007, p. 93). It may also be a response to instability, and a new context for cultural production that emanates from a “decentred and diasporic world of difference, displacement, and exchanges” (Giroux, 2004, para. 3). Paula Owen (2011) describes the very form of craft as a means to work through such uncertainty; Acts of touching, marking, assembling, and stitching represent contemplative and stabilizing responses to an unstable world. Whether remedying socio-cultural instability or responding to the need for new understandings in craft, Stevens (2011) describes the category as “at a generational crossroads, expanding to embrace aspects of hybridization that have not previously been recognized” (p. 43).

Curator Daniel Charny (2011) explains that at every stage in learning, a shift occurs in a maker’s relationship to materials and tools, gradually allowing the “frustrating to become pleasurable.” Once able to garner some competence, to exercise agency through an expressive facility within material practice, “the experience is intuitive, like sport,” or “meditative, like music” (para. 2). Scholar Dennis Stevens (2011) contextualizes emerging makers within a long history of resistance, yet underscores the importance of them living out their own “truths” within the medium, advising “theirs are the paths that will lead the culture to new places and, ultimately, new reasons for being” (p. 53). These explanations
point to an absence of first-person accounts, and pave the way for emerging voices to be heard.

**postindustrialism and the unstable identity of craft**

Theorists cite the role of contemporary craft as being a subversive one, dusting off its long-held outsider status, and mobilizing an argument in which the private, idiosyncratic, and deferential stands up to the authoritative, homogenized and ubiquitous (Adamson, 2010; Alfoldy, 2007; Bratich & Brush, 2011; Charny, 2011; Forrest, 2007; Hung & Magliaro, 2007; Metcalf, 2002, 2007). As a counterpoint, the field of craft challenges both maker and viewer to reflect upon notions of efficiency, value, labour, embodiment, and our immersion within a world of things. However, in a twenty-first century context, historical scripts, even defiant ones, hold limited relevance for emerging makers. While craft may position itself as other, it does so on political, social, and economic ground that has changed from that which preceded it. All acts of fabrication have become nostalgic in the West, with many one-industry towns longing for the plant that once existed. Craft is pitted against industry, yet it is also pitted against its absence. It is a counterpoint to present-day Bangladeshi sweatshops, and equally a counterpoint to former Western manufacturing sites where no manual skill remains.

American sociologist Daniel Bell (1999) is credited with introducing the term *postindustrial* in the 1970s, signifying a seismic shift in the labour force that turned away from the production of goods in favour of the production of services. Postindustrialism grew from the global deregulation that characterized neoliberal economic policies. It refers to economic and social conditions in which theoretical knowledge replaces practical skills,
and technological growth becomes a defining feature in economic strength. The term information society is closely tied with the postindustrial; both denote the handling of information or knowledge as being a significant part of economic and cultural life. As researcher Ellen Dunham-Jones (2007) states, “Instead of producing farms, coal mines, or cities, post-industrial societies produce highly educated, mobile people and organizations” (p. 3).

The practical ramifications of postindustrialism have been sweeping, and the dearth of domestic fabrication has left an indelible mark on all cultural practice in the West of which craft is a part. Indeed, it is impossible to examine any current craft production without considering how both the glut of foreign-made goods and the unbridled Western consumption of them have erased all need for the utility that craft formerly offered. The emergent big box landscapes sprouting from the ashes of industrialism and their homogenous backdrop of placeless uniformity provide a new context for craft as resistor. Having been severed from the production chain of material culture, a need for authenticity is sought in a “deeper relationship with the world of things” (Most, 2005, p. 21).

If promise exists in this economic landscape, it is within this “deeper relationship,” as communities of makers have begun to adapt to postindustrial realities. Artisanal movements have formed across economic sectors in North America, seeing the rise of local farming, independent bookstores, small batch beer production, specialty cheese making, tech entrepreneurs and bike makers, amongst other industries. Etsy, the online site of all things handmade saw its sales rise 70.3% in 2012 over the previous year, to $895.1 million from $525.6 million in 2011 (Mitroff, 2013). Researcher Charles Heying (2010) studied the
nascent artisanal economy in Portland Oregon, once the hub of lumber- and millwork-based manufacturers, and now characterized by its growing alternative economy. Heying comments that the economy of mass production had previously “divided work from play, retail spaces from living spaces, management from labor, designer from product” (Koffman, 2010). The micro-businesses of Portland were able to redress such divisions and offer a promising social and economic dimension to ravaged communities. This research points to a sector that may be currently unacknowledged in postindustrialism’s theoretical framework, and holds clues to the existence of an optimistic counterpoint for present-day makers.

Importantly, the market access afforded to makers within such an artisanal economy is essentially limited to those who can afford the privilege and appreciate its associated status. In this respect, modern makers share the conundrum facing William Morris who advocated for a democratization of the decorative arts, yet chiefly sold wallpaper designs to the affluent. Micro-businesses, such as those in Portland, represent that which is ethical and meaningful to their patrons, and rely on this association in order to be distinguished mass producing counterparts. Toys purchased from Etsy do not compete with those from Walmart, but are designed to draw a limited demographic who have the ability to base consumption decisions on non-economic priorities, and benefit from the cultural distinction conferred by such products.

Interestingly, the notion of craft practice as occupying a position of moral altruism that was advocated by the Arts and Crafts movement in the mid-nineteenth century, is central to the business success of modern-day makers. This position is also reflected in Walter
Benjamin’s description of the *aura*, one in which craft’s authentic mode of production imbued it with a transcendent quality (1968). That which was mechanically reproduced, by contrast, destroyed the presence of the object in trying to repeat and refine it, precluding any possibility for transcendence. The ethically charged role of the handmade object has illustrious roots that continue to characterize its cultural conception; its associated potency as a status marker is as relevant in the twenty-first century as it was in the nineteenth.

Conceptual work in which craft is centrally featured has also blossomed within postindustrialism as the need for utility has dissipated. The methodology of craft has allured artists who have adopted its repertoire of skills and materials in order to comment upon labour, efficiency, embodiment, and value, recognizing their distance from the necessity of making for utilitarian intent. Artist-educators Shannon Stratton and Judith Leeman implement craft as a methodology in the exhibition and accompanying anthology *Gestures of Resistance* (2011), in which eight craft artists performed the making of art within a museum environment. Laying bare the language of craft, the performances examined movement, slowness, labour, and agency to explore craft’s role in a present-day context. Stratton (2007) links the methodology of making to that of slow activism, a process by which artists “inhabit the world in a better way” (p. 44). Everyday actions – walking, cooking, and making objects – become small acts of resistance in which one can assert personal agency and allegiance to a community. Textile media are well positioned to critique such systems as their associations with feminine, domestic, and private realms represent the antithesis of economic clout. Public interventions using textile media contest hierarchical power, and represent a redirection of energy and labour away from economic
productivity, holding a mirror to the persuasive currents of capitalist thought. Swedish researcher Love Jönsson (2004) agrees, identifying the “unstable identity” of craft (2004) as one that offered a methodology able to cast a lens on a broader range of cultural attitudes that had been irrevocably altered by the sweeping impact of globalization.

Bratisch and Brush (2011) identify craft media as prompting us to “rethink a number of basic bifurcations,” including that of public/private, past/present, masculine/feminine, producer/consumer and technology/craft (p. 254). They address the methodology of craft—its modes of fabrication, legacy, and raw materials—and the growing number of ways it has been used self-reflexively, as a means of cultural critique.

The growing tension between the practical irrelevance of craft and its methodological relevance to emerging makers has been accentuated by ready access to an arsenal of technological tools. Dennis Stevens (2011) reminds us that valuing that which is handmade becomes increasingly relevant “the further technology takes us away from the tangible experience” (p. 45), repeating a prediction made by Marshall McLuhan forty years earlier. While new makers are adopting the language of craft, they are doing so in a “strikingly different way than how their parents did business” (Stevens, 2011, p. 55). On one hand, they have been armed with a strong repertoire of technical skills and material knowledge that have opened new avenues of experience and “ruptured the seamlessness of the technological present” (Bratich & Brush, 2011, p. 236). On the other, technological tools are a key part of their arsenal, and the formerly competing domains of craft and technology are considered less divergent than they were by their predecessors.
While the stage is set for a twenty-first century erasure of craft from higher learning, the current climate of craft production is decidedly more complicated. Postmodern, postindustrialist, and postdisciplinary ideologies have demanded that crafts practitioners be self-reflexive within a broad new economic and aesthetic climate. Why make objects amidst an abundant supply? What are the attractions of a pursuit carrying a longstanding legacy that has become economically vulnerable and theoretically problematic? How do makers navigate cultural conceptions of making that may prescribe or delimit their practice? How emerging makers address these questions allows for an analysis that can reflect back on a theoretical framework for craft, and envision renewed approaches in material arts curricula.
Chapter three: methodology and procedures

This research was undertaken as a qualitative inquiry as the guiding assumptions and principles it offered were well suited to understanding the experience of emerging makers (Creswell, 2007, p.17). Epistemologically, qualitative research allowed for my own proximity with participants. It recognized that as both an artist and educator my role in the research was not a disinterested one, and it offered the means by which knowledge could be constructed collaboratively. Rhetorically, its reliance on detailed description, participant experience, and accessibility of language, worked effectively to communicate participant perspectives to a wider readership. Finally, it supported methodologies that were inductive and context-specific, “rich in description of people, places, and conversations, and not easily handled by statistical procedures” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p.2). The inquiry could be built from the ground up, determined by the threads that emerged from participant stories of experience.

**narrative inquiry**

Narrative inquiry was used as a methodological approach to examine five emerging makers’ stories of experience, and compare them to the prevailing theoretical framework within craft discourse. It provided the means by which participants could describe their stories of experience, as well as the analytic tools required to deconstruct them. The strategies adopted in this inquiry drew heavily on the combined rigor and irreverence of Barbara Czarniawska (2004), the guidelines to defining and analyzing narratives outlined by Catherine Reissman (2002), and the detailed narrative research notes of Elliot Mishler (1999). The three were chosen for their rationale in implementing narrative methods, and the ways in which these rationale fit comfortably with the intent of this research.
Reissman (2008) points to the expansive function of narratives, including their ability to interpret past events, persuade an audience, invite listener participation, and spur social change. She describes narratives as ubiquitous and diverse, from myths to stained glass windows to conversation. Their purpose, beyond that of entertainment, is “to teach, and to learn, to ask for an interpretation, and to give one” (2004, p. 650). Unlike positivist approaches to research, Mishler (1999) adds that narratives capture “the pattern, form, and structure of trajectories of development,” that allow for meaningful understanding (p. 51).

This research exploited narrative inquiry’s capacity to connect to other texts, what Czarniawska describes as a “conversational analysis writ large: texts speaking to other texts, across times and places” (2004, p. 650). The participants spoke thematically to each other; they also spoke to a history of makers and theorists in the field. Conversing “across times and places” with a degree of coherence depends upon analytical approaches that are adopted. In the oral narratives of this research, the first level of “analysis” occurred with the participant recounting her story, and the second took place with my analysis of it. It is here where links are made with other narratives, texts are contextualized within a broader social sphere, the personal is fused with the political, and new experiences of making are brought to the foreground (Reissman, 2002).

Narrative inquiry allows for a reconsideration of “truth” in a way that mirrors a postmodern understanding, and, by extension, the ideological stance of this paper. The intent of this methodology is not to convey a sweeping singular narrative but to provide a forum for capturing the specificity of a particular set of circumstances, and to represent
individual voices with accuracy. As Czarniawska (2004) explains, “The main problem of rendering someone else’s story in one’s own idiom is the political act of totalizing that it entails” (p. 658). So, while this research mapped out expansive thematic categories, they are occupied by widely diverging, personalized, and distinctive responses. Positionality and subjectivity are inherent to the stories, which are analyzed as “meaning-making units of discourse in and of themselves, to arrive at partial and contingent ‘small t’ truths” (Reissman, 2002, p. 705).

Capturing the variation within individual narratives is intrinsic to the methodology and analytical framework. It is equally a reflection of my personal stance as a researcher. My own experience in the medium of textiles has tactile, artistic, therapeutic, kinaesthetic, social, and political dimensions. As an instructor, I observe distinctly varied responses among students. Some are intent on marketing their work; others speak persuasively about the importance of communicating within a social realm. Many are lured by the physicality of material practice, and the “frustrating” to “pleasurable” trajectory described by Charny (2011). Seeking individuation through their work is a common attribute. Each research participant added additional objectives to this list.

Finally, narrative inquiry confronts the “rituals of exclusion” cited by theorist Michel Foucault (1977) that have historically framed issues of identity and gender (p. 83). In feminist theory’s endorsement of collaborative research (Goldstein, 1997); avoidance of objectifying relationships (Cook, 1986); and intention of giving voice to historically silenced populations (hooks, 2000), there is significant overlap with postmodernist principles. Scholar Virginia Oleson (2005) identifies key feminist research methods as
those that seek to reclaim women’s voices, and allow them to be heard “without exploiting or distorting them” (as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 27). This approach commonly positions ethical issues of care in a central role, alongside practices that build positive relationships with participants.

While this research did not foreground issues of gender, it would be irresponsible to overlook the longstanding legacy of critical disregard that has characterized textile objects within visual culture. While the status of craft sits uncomfortably in present-day cultural practices, textile materials and techniques carry an additional burden through their gendered association, connoting that which is feminine, domestic, cloistered, ineffectual, and obsessive. As such, the notion of honouring research participants, and putting their stories of experience at centre stage was a key concern. Data collected through participant narratives determined both the themes and the final form of the research. My intent was to present the reflection of each participant alongside my own, allowing individual voices to create a diverse narrative of making, and to allow this to reflect back on its current theoretical construction.14

In their analysis of key narrative typologies, Reissman (2005) and Mishler (1999) both see narrative analysis as a fusion of form and content, promoting an approach in which what is being recounted is granted the same importance as how. While the two researchers

14 A comprehensive overview of the marginalization of women’s textile work can be found in Rozsika Parker’s The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine, 1984. Parker asserts that gendered associations with textiles prompted a denigration of craft in relation to fine art.
delineate similar and corresponding typologies for analyzing narratives, they also advocate a flexible approach to their use. Boundaries are not distinct but “overlap and blur” (Reissman, 2008, p. 51) as a researcher turns to more than one mode of analysis to “reveal truths about human experience” (p. 10).

Within this research, the emphasis of data analysis was primarily thematic in nature. Structural aspects to phrasing, syntactic qualities of language, and occasionally omissions that were apparent to me were included, but to a far lesser degree than the content of participant’s words. As such, while both the intention and content were “interrogated,” the emphasis was on what was being told as opposed to how it was put in storied form (Reissman, 2008). Thematic categories were selected inductively from the interview data, and groupings were created to re-represent the textual accounts. Linking the emergent themes to social/cultural spheres was central to this research. Ultimately, the analysis of stories told was designed to hold a mirror to current conceptions of craft and have something to say about it.

**Narrative and Making**

Links between craft and narrative abound: we *craft* stories, spin *yarns*, follow *threads* of conversation, *construct* plots in a *fabric* of life. Crafts practitioners speak of concept, composition, structure, coherence, and the desire to communicate. Acts of making and storytelling are commonly the humble and ordinary events embedded in daily life, the “non-discursive modes of communication” that cultivate individual and collective identity.

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15 Mishler’s fusion of form and content corresponds with Reissman’s *structural* and *thematic* analysis.
Emerging views on making (Tilley, 2006, p. 7). A handmade object becomes a “repository for narration,” intimately linking it to lived experience (Rowley, 1997, p. 81). The two function as tacit tools for making sense of life and one’s place within it.

Within the context of this research, craft and narrative can be linked both as verbs and as nouns; they allow for an understanding of lived experience, and become material representations of this understanding. In the first interpretation, craft and narrative can be viewed in motion, as acts of fabrication that reflect the subjectivity of the maker. They commonly rely upon protracted methods that make use of intimate and sensory ways of knowing. Links between textiles and text are deeply embedded through metaphor and etymology, both words coming from the same Latin root texere (to weave, fabricate). Artist and educator Mackenzie Frere (2007) refers to weaving fabric as a soundless means of harnessing thoughts, the slow and tiny gestures required becoming a tactile means of recording the many perceptions involved in its making. Prolonged and attentive modes of fabrication commonly describe narrative inquiry, a methodology that studies “the ways humans experience the world” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2009, p. 2). The nuanced narratives that result illuminate a nature of experience that exceeds those of positivist models.

In their material form, craft and narrative are modes of expression commonly overlooked through their ubiquity, marking human activity, making meaning, and inviting a dialogic encounter with the user. This encounter hinges upon the method of representation—whether written or fabricated—connecting the viewer to the hand of the maker.

Researcher Neill Brown warns of stripping craft of all but its semiotic meaning, asserting
that the subjectivity conveyed through a work’s materiality plays an essential role as an agent of communication (1997, p.14). An Iranian prayer shawl, for example, may carry the same meaning whether woven out of wool in a village hut or out of nylon in a Bangkok sweatshop, if read semiotically, but this interpretation is erroneous as it misses the most critical information. A more appropriate “reading” is one that mirrors craft fabrication, understanding the object as evidence of an embodied pursuit that communicates the maker’s subjectivity. Frere (2007) refers to textiles resonating “with the accumulation of breath, care, and time,” (p.108). Their function—to wrap, warm, or enfold—is to swaddle us at birth and shroud us at death. Intimately linked to human experience, the medium is grounded in the objects of the everyday, the ignored objects of habit and use.

Narrative inquiry is used to determine how emerging makers make sense of their lives through stories, while narrative analysis provides an approach for extracting meaning from such stories. Understanding that material practice is a form of meaning making, narrative analysis is used as an interpretive device through which this experience is represented. Narrative analysis does not analyze the experience of making, but rather the stories that are told to make sense of the experience.

situating myself

I come to this inquiry as a researcher, artist, and educator. My proximity to the field of inquiry indicates that my role as a researcher is not a disinterested one. As a young adult, I found material practice to be an essential tool for identity building. It offered the opportunity to quietly assert myself through what my hands were able to do. My early years exemplified Paula Owen’s references to craft making as a stabilizing response to an
unstable world. Much about my life and professional path felt beyond my control, but I knew how to make things.

Importantly, this desire for stability was closely connected to a bodily-kinaesthetic understanding of making. I grew to understand the materials I was working with by allowing my hands to teach me. I learned how to felt fabric through building strength in my arms; painting silk was done through a gentle touch; I wound warps by repeating the same slow movement of my hands, and learned to recognize material through handling and smelling it. I trusted my body and appreciated it as a useful tool.

The idea of sense and sense making guided my learning, and Emma Neuberg’s (2010) description of hands as tools of perception aptly describes my formative years of training. Although self-reflection was elusive to me at the time, this embodied way of “seeing” provided an inroad into other modes of understanding. It also provided a means of participating in a community and situating myself in the world. Kinaesthetic, tactile, therapeutic, and aesthetic attributes of making became closely linked over time, and are now virtually indistinguishable.

As an instructor in an art/design university, the work I undertake is informed by my experience as a learner, attracted to the expressive and tactile processes of material fabrication and the self-actualizing potential it represented. I am reminded of educator Bruce Metcalf’s description of craft practice as a “vehicle to construct meaning” in the lives of his students, one that has granted them “substance and dignity and grace” (2002, p. 17). I too have had the privilege of witnessing otherwise reluctant or challenged learners
develop a rapport with process, expand an artistic vision through the act of making, or allow the handling of materials to dictate new directions in their work.

I am also acutely aware of barriers, both existential and systemic, that stand in the way of this process. Institutional ideology, and the socio-cultural realm beyond, privilege a clean hands approach to learning. While curricula emphasize a reconception of design process and are widely disparaging of postindustrial models, there can be an ironic parallel disregard for the realities of bodies at work. Materials-based practice occupies an anomalous position in the institution that mirrors its anomalous position in a vast social world beyond. There is a shared attitude of being under siege—an inevitable result of cultural discourse that situates it as such; a sense of being vulnerable to programs that are more forward-looking, innovative, and efficient; perhaps a subtle sense of defeat in the face of new and attractive offerings, as programs vie for space, equipment, and students. Such positioning becomes an obstacle to developing a personal and professional practice within material arts. There is a tacit message that universities whose branding hinges on promoting imagination have something to say about how imagination is defined and expressed.

I am unwilling to dismiss the language-free dialogue that takes place between maker and materials in the fibre studio I have the privilege to teach in, and the means such conversation affords for generating new understandings. Rather than positioning such approaches as under siege, I am curious about the ways in which hands-off programs can benefit from such methods. My pedagogical stance is not intended as fetishistic, nor do I desire to make any false assertions linking handwork and virtue. Rather, my position is a
response to limited and exclusive claims to knowledge. If knowledge is embodied rather than transmitted through alternate means, I want to understand the learners’ experience of their field of practice. In addition to expanding upon the theoretical platform of craft within the domain of visual culture, this points to a commonly disregarded mode of knowledge building, and its potential for a considered second look.

**site selection/participant recruitment**

The Fibre Studio at CAU is situated within the area of Material Art and Design, a subset of the University’s Design department. The curriculum and modes of course delivery have much in common with other Canadian art and design institutions: the program offers a range of courses pertaining to textile construction and surface design, teaching approaches promote an expansive range of professional practices, and pedagogy rests upon a “craft-based” way of knowing, in line with Adamson’s and Metcalf’s explanation, emphasizing material exploration and embodied modes of learning through hands-on investigation.

While specific facilities and course offerings vary amongst Canadian universities, the particular concerns of teaching a fibre program in a post-secondary context, and shared twenty-first century cultural conditions, are such that the findings of this research are not relegated to a single institution. Rather, the findings and implications are designed to be relatable, speaking beyond the research site in question.

This study made no distinctions regarding a participant’s specific approach within this discipline, beyond their formal training having occurred in the CAU Fibre Studio. As such, all students shared a background in material exploration, design process, and concept development along with a range of themes in art history and present-day visual culture.
They have learned not just to create work but to critically reflect upon it and contextualize it.

As a current instructor in the Fibre Studio, I was anchoring the inquiry in my “backyard” (Creswell, p.122). John Creswell identifies workplace related research to be inherently perilous, as it requires proximity to both the site and research participants that can jeopardize good data. While this may be the case, I am also aware of the distinct advantages it offered. I was afforded access to a group of graduates that may have been difficult for me to contact otherwise. As well, the curriculum that had guided the participants’ studies during their three years in the studio was very familiar to me. Most importantly, the research was an extension of a concern that held both personal and professional resonance, rather than something that did not capture my interest. The power dynamics that resulted from my proximity to the research site, while no doubt present, were mitigated due to the fact that participants were no longer enrolled at the university, and I did not exert any formal influence over them. Informal influence may be harder to measure. Despite my intent of putting participants at ease, and creating a dialogue that was both encouraging and reflective, there may have been residual power dynamics that affected our interaction. This is addressed later in this chapter under scope and limitations.

The choice of research stems from the acknowledgment that professional practice and research interests are closely intertwined. My experience as a student learning tactile materials-based processes was as pivotal in my life as my current role facilitating and witnessing them. Qualitative research presents an ongoing challenge of balancing impartial investigation with subjectivity, and the selection of a research subject is no
It is not uncommon for the researcher to be ensconced in the field of research, exercising the requisite rigor to ensure the findings are viewed as reliable despite his/her partial view. Further, in narrative inquiry, the role of the researcher in co-constructing new narratives is central to the qualitative approach. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) describe all inquiries as “interactions of experiences” between participant and researcher, with the “centrality of the researcher’s own experience” as a key starting point (p. 414).

There were two inclusion criteria for the research: Participants needed to be graduates from the Material Art and Design Fibre Program at CAU, and they were required to have a graduation date of June, 2011 or June, 2012. Restricting participation to the two most recent graduating cohorts ensured all could readily recall their undergraduate experience. While intentions for a professional practice was not a prerequisite, all were either involved in one or doing preparatory work for such involvement. Their post-university experience may have afforded the opportunity of reflection, and provided insight into the social, economic, artistic and/or political context of their practice. The combination of their recent educational experience, followed by a period of reflection, and a transition to a professional life contributed to layered narratives when recounting their experience.

The inclusion criteria listed above indicated potential participants had a common undergraduate program of study that included a concentration in textile media alongside lecture/seminar courses pertaining to visual culture, concept development, and professional practice. The curriculum ensured that students were fully immersed in material practice as well as exposed to a theoretical grounding in how such practice is socially, culturally, and economically positioned. As this research centered on how recent
fibre program graduates understand the experience of making in a present-day context, both pedagogical approaches played a role in shaping the views they currently hold.

Potential participants were selected from the 2012 graduating class, with the intent of advancing to the 2011 cohort, if required. The email invitation outlined participant involvement in the study (two interviews, transcript review), the research timeline, data storage, compensation, and provisions for withdrawal in order that they were familiar with the process before formal consent was requested. Six Material Art and Design graduates accepted the invitation to participate, all from the 2012 cohort. One withdrew directly prior to the first interview. As I had received a significant amount of data from the initial round of interviews, I chose to work with the remaining five, rather than attempt to solicit a replacement. Two rounds of interviews took place between February and the end of March 2013, approximately 10 to 12 months after all had finished their undergraduate studies.

**methods**

In order to provide “the textures and nuances of human interaction” that qualitative research offers (Kilbourn, 2004, p. 98), the study relied on four main data sources:

1) **Semi-structured Interview #1 – Reflection on Creative Practice** (Appendix C).

   Participants were asked to take part in a semi-structured interview of approximately one hour in length, in which they reflected on their own practice. The intent of this initial interview was to gather data related to their experience of making as well as begin to understand how they situate themselves within a language of making. Importantly, the meeting also offered an opportunity for the participant and I to
become acquainted outside of the Fibre Studio and develop a comfort level with each other. Of the five graduate participants, I had only been an instructor to one, and knew the others only peripherally.

A series of open-ended questions guided this interview, allowing participants to begin to reflect on their views of material practice, the roots of these views, and the institutional experiences that helped shape them. There was an important fluidity to our interaction at this meeting. Sometimes particular questions were skipped and revisited at the end, other times I offered examples—including those of my own experience—to help spur reflection. Some participants required that I play a more active role than others in the interview process. Commonly, it unfolded more like a conversation than a series of questions and answers.

2) **Semi-structured interview #2 – Review of work.** Participants were asked to show and verbally describe two examples of their work: one from their student years, and the second from their present-day practice. Informal discussion followed, which commonly included the participant reflecting on the earlier work in relation to the current example. I also posed questions around the concept, processes used, and critical reception of the work with the intention of gathering deeper insight into making and language.

My interest with the second interview was to foster reflection beyond the objects themselves, and allow the conversation to lead to other themes. This goal was met with mixed success. The informal nature of our discussion, and the range of information
participants chose to address, was such that the data was wide-ranging as well as inconsistent. For example, it was important for some participants to highlight the process of designing and executing the work; to others, the intent behind the work or the time invested in its execution was key. At times we remained stuck here, not readily able to use the work as a springboard to other themes, and the particulars of design decisions, materials, and/or processes dominated our conversation. Much of this information was not directly useful to this research, resulting in minimal data of direct relevance for some of the participants. A more constructive aspect of the second interview was that it provided an important opportunity to address lingering questions from the first. Each interview began this way, as I sought clarification or further detail regarding some of their earlier statements. The time between the first and second round of interviews allowed me to transcribe each, and determine where such elaboration would be useful. Revisiting earlier questions also seemed to be an effective warm-up for both of us before launching into a new discussion about their work.

Both the first and second interviews occurred in mutually agreed upon locations. I suggested a couple of options around the CAU campus, but asked for their input in selecting a place where they felt comfortable to talk. Three of the initial interviews took place in quiet rooms booked at CAU; one was held at a coffee shop in the participant’s neighbourhood, and the last participant interview was conducted by Skype. For the second round, I was able to join three of the five participants at their work sites.

3) **Fieldnotes.** My own fieldnotes accompanied both interviews. They were used as a means to record additional questions that arose, evaluate my own role as interviewer,
highlight observations that may not be captured on tape, and to reflect back on the research questions. They proved to be a helpful tool in refining the interview process, and filling in additional details that were omitted in the audio files.

4) **Transcript Review.** Participants were sent transcribed copies of the two semi-structured interviews, and given the option of clarifying or including additional comments. This final form of data collection was an optional one, but two of the five participants submitted important comments that added essential detail to their views.

**ethical considerations**

I adhered to ethical guidelines outlined in the University of Toronto’s Research Ethics Protocol to ensure the protection of participants’ rights. The participants were notified in the initial letter of invitation of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without adverse repercussions. Prior to each interview, I informed participants of their right to refuse or defer responding to questions, and their option to edit responses once the interviews were transcribed.

The five participants who agreed to participate in the research did so willingly, following the first email invitation. At the initial interview, I informed the participants that they had the choice of selecting pseudonyms, as had been indicated in the Research Ethics Protocol. I advised them to decide how they would like to be represented following the final interview. When we arrived at this point, all were in agreement that they did not feel pseudonyms were necessary. After careful deliberation, I took the step of assigning pseudonyms nonetheless and remove identifiers, including the name of the post-
secondary institution. I wanted to ensure participants had no misgivings about being represented in the study. As emerging artists, I felt that they were in the initial stages of professional practice, and expressing views that could necessarily evolve over time. As well, the digital availability of this research created the potential for broad and indefinite access over which I had no control. I informed participants of this decision and replaced their names with pseudonyms. These pseudonyms were then used on all transcripts and written documents pertaining to this research.

**scope and limitations**

A qualitative study of this size necessarily imposes limitations. Chief among them is that sweeping pronouncements were unavoidably curbed by temporal and contextual specificity. While this study sought a detailed understanding of the experience of making from the perspective of emerging makers, it could not suitably capture overriding trends or causal theories that a large-scale quantitative study may have provided. By extension, validity was measured by its *transferability* as opposed to its *generalizeability*. Transferability depends upon data providing a recognizable and relatable account of the social setting in which it was conducted, in order that readers can assess its applicability to other social contexts (Delamont & Atkinson, 2003, p. 338).

A participant group of five was able to offer personal and nuanced accounts of experience that would not have been obtainable through statistical methods, but a larger quantitative study could supplement the findings of the existing research and add a deeper layer of meaning. While qualitative inquiry proudly resists its “generalizability,” there can be advantages to identifying pronounced and far-reaching tendencies within the participant
group when wanting to promote change within an existing theoretical framework or a curricular approach.

All of the participants were graduates of the Canadian Art University, Material Art and Design’s Fibre Program. While some participant observations may be specific to CAU, the recommendations for craft theory and curriculum that are drawn from the data extend beyond the boundaries of the CAU to include other post-secondary institutions with similar program offerings. The transferability of this research may have been strengthened by including participants from other Canadian fibre programs, both broadening and diversifying the narratives of experience. As a program stream with scant representation nationwide, there are nonetheless different approaches to curriculum delivery within the field. Capturing participant reflections from this broader pool would add useful depth and relevance to the existing research.

Despite attempts to mitigate power relationships, my own role as educator teaching second- and third-year students could have communicated preconceived notions to the people I chose to study. One participant made reference to the fact that she associated me with the Fibre studio. Given the context of this comment, I felt that this connection may have prevented her from being fully candid with some of her criticisms. She expressed her views during the final interview, and while it provided the unexpected opportunity to address some of her concerns, I was aware that others may have felt similarly and chosen not to discuss their feelings with me. The possibility that participants moderated their opinions in order to soften perceived institutional disapproval may have been impossible for me to detect, and could represent an important limitation to grounding the research.
“in my own backyard.”

Finally, this research touches on expansive ideologies that have informed twenty-first century culture only to the extent that it needs to. Postmodernism and postindustrialism are theoretical frameworks with sweeping sets of overlapping as well as contradictory views, brought about by various theorists having a hand in shaping their evolving frameworks. Only the aspects of these ideologies that contextualize the research and impact the research questions are included. In the same way, the research does not address all trends within the current craft movement, but is restricted to the pertinent details that reflect its current theoretical conception.
Chapter four: language and early understandings

The dominant conception of craft in current discourse positions it as a methodology or a “way of doing things” (Adamson, 2007), characterized by the central attributes of embodiment, agency, resistance, and skill. It is this theoretical stance that participants’ voices are speaking to, and the role of my analysis to see where ideas align and where they deviate. The temporal categories that frame participant experience address the periods before, during, and after postsecondary education to build a broad pool of findings with which to comment upon the guiding theoretical position of craft.

In this chapter, and the two that follow, I analyze participant narratives in relation to the current theoretical position of craft. As the first of three temporal categories, this section looks at participant experience before post-secondary studies. Prior to doing so, it begins, as this paper did, with language. In the first section, Sewing needles and circuit boards: the language of making, I situate participants within a vocabulary of making, and illustrate how they make sense of the range of relevant labels to define their practice. An analysis of their narratives confronts the overarching and contentiously defined categories of art, craft, and design. It also touches upon some of the tensions that exist around disciplinary boundaries, as well as prevalent distinctions that separate technological tools from their no-tech cousins.

In Early inroads and intentions, I examine the experience of making that preceded post-secondary studies, by analyzing participant reflections on formative experiences, as well as their own often-disjointed road leading to formal studies.
The final two sections, *Answering an unarticulated need: the sensory encounter* and *Craft and situated cognition*, investigate participant views on craft as a way of knowing. In the first, I address the sensory, emotional, and physical engagement that the aesthetic experience of making both demands and activates; In the second, I analyze participant narratives in relation to a paradigm in which the hands lead the brain to new understandings.

**sewing needles and circuit boards: the language of making**

*It is time to move beyond the limitations of terminologies that fragment and separate our appreciation of creative actions, and consider the "behaviors of making" that practitioners share.*

David Revere McFadden, 2013, p. 1

*When I say I’m a craftsperson, [...] they assume that I’m putting macaroni on paper.*

Lidia

Dominant voices in emerging craft theory defend the vocabulary of craft, seeing the term as having vital new meaning in a twenty-first century environment. Whether it resists industrialization, capitalism, efficiency, or the dehumanizing effect of a turbo-capitalist world, the field has proudly been reasserted as relevant to both makers and viewers. As Fariello states, “craft is newly intriguing” in present-day culture. Far from obsolescent, “craft seems to be on everybody’s mind” (2011, p. 23).

If it were indeed on everybody’s mind, *craft* would presumably be on the minds of emerging makers who had been schooled in its techniques. Its connotations as a verb, reflect the material-based skills and embodied approach to making within the Fibre
Studio. However, the confident assertion of this term was not reflected within the participant group. In fact, when asked to identify descriptors of their current practice, none of the participants used the word *craft* until I introduced it in conversation. The words *artist, designer, or maker* were raised in various combinations when imposing broad categories around their body of work, although some found this terminology complicated as well. If, “the skills and material knowledge central to craft continue to have great value,” as writer Teleri Lloyd-Jones (2011) attests, this value was not reflected in the vocabulary of the emerging makers participating in this study (para. 6).

The term *craft* was identified as either an incomplete or problematic descriptor by some of the participants. While the nature of the word’s inadequacies was different for each, many had to do with the derogatory connotations of the word. Lidia commented:

> when I say I’m a crafts-person, because I think that I [am], in the way that I use materials and I execute things, they assume that I’m putting macaroni on paper. They don’t make that connection, so I think it’s easier to say sometime that you’re an artist or you’re a designer.

Despite a theoretical stance that may claim otherwise, Lidia expressed that the word’s connotation was, in fact, a hindrance in the marketing of her work. She later elaborated, “If I think about craft overall, I think it includes common design skills. You’re physically making something. So, I can throw that out there, but a lot of people don’t understand it.” Instead, she explained, “I throw designer in there, because I think that I need to.”
Natalie initially expressed that the category of “craft” might be too limited to describe the work she was doing in wearable technology. While on one hand she saw, even defended, its relevance in describing her work, on the other, she questioned whether its parameters were flexible enough to allow for the nature of the work she was doing. She commented:

I get kind of confused about where wearable technology fits into craft. Or maybe craft should expand to include wearable technology, as part of what you think of when you think of craft. If you even want to use the term craft. Because [my work in wearable technology] is craft-based. I mean you’re crafting these things. They conduct electricity, and they’re wearable.

Later, Natalie expanded on her previous comments, and clarified how she felt her work fit within the categories of art, design, and craft. She explained, “I struggle with the three categories because I see them as one. I suppose I lean toward the idea that there are elements of art, craft and design in any object whether it has been hand crafted or manufactured.” Regarding her work in wearable technology, she stated that her process relied upon skill sets found in art, design, and craft, as much as it did upon computer science and engineering.

I inferred that while craft itself was an incomplete categorization for Natalie to describe her work, each of the terms on the list would have been equally incomplete, if assessed independently. Her practice, like that of many emerging makers, incorporates a range of skills from disparate spheres, and as such, challenges ready categorization. Her wearable work enables dancers to generate sound through their movements using foot sensors. The
use of a sewing needle is as intrinsic to making the footwear as the software engineer’s use of a circuit board.

While Natalie did not make distinctions around technology co-existing with craft, other writers and theorists have cited the important relationship between the two in redefining craft practice (Adamson, 2010; Buszek, 2011; Stevens, 2011). Often interpreted as existing in binary opposition, craft has been explained as a refusal of a “high tech world” in which a direct connection to humanity is endangered, “or at the very least rapidly reconfigured” (Buszek, 2011, 1). Zoey, who defined herself as “an artist, designer, and an idea person” stated, “I would never say I’m a craftsperson/maker just because I do want to involve technology in my practice.” She recalled a ceramist “who no longer builds his ceramic by hand. He used computer-aided software to make the mold. I’m not sure if I can consider him as a craftsperson anymore just because his practice now has become solely dependent on technology.” As such, Zoey’s definition of craft was contingent on particular sets of tools being used. She stated, “Maybe in my head, the moment technology is involved it substitutes the title craftsperson. I associate [the creator] more as a designer.”

While Lidia and Natalie defended the connection between their work and the field of craft, Zoey did not see its applicability. Importantly, it was not a descriptor any of them raised, notable by its very omission. Alison referred to herself as a “maker” or a “designer” as the terms best described her intentions of taking an idea and “turning it into a potentially functional item for people to use.” Tanya also described herself as a “maker.” The broadness of the category fit with her cross-disciplinary intent “to aesthetically embody art, design and craft in all of its definitions.”
While all rejected craft as a blanket categorization, I noted that many of the words used by the participants fell within its purview. For example, Tanya identified her current practice as making “functional things for families” that are of “durable quality” and “bring personal meaning.” Alison spoke of her knit and woven sample work and her plans for further development within sustainable garment construction. Her experimentation with materials and textile techniques was leading to “creating things for people to interact with, for people to use, for people to benefit from.” Lidia was silkscreening fabric, and designing both repeat patterns and one-off prints with the intent of marketing them. Zoey described her current internship at a menswear clothing company, stating, “right now I’m doing a lot of computer drafting, fashion illustration. I get to cut some fabrics, feel different fabric samples. I’m a very tactile person, and I like making.” The embodied and skilled execution expressed by each in the creation of finished work adopted the meaning of craft, if not the terminology.

Institutional influences are key when examining how participants define their professional practice. The five received their formal training within a university that avoids the word craft in its course titles, descriptions, and syllabi, as most have chosen to. Students are streamed into departments of Art or Design, the latter of which houses the department of Material Art and Design’s Fibre Program. Course offerings in material and visual culture are abundant within the department of Liberal Studies. There is no course that addresses

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16 The American Craft Museum tacitly championed this trend a decade ago in its own rebranding as the Museum of Arts and Design. While the simultaneous name change at the California College of Arts has not been replicated on Canadian soil, these institutional precedents legitimized a distancing from the word, despite their claims to the contrary.
craft theory or the contentious domains of art, craft, and design. A single course in Cross Cultural Issues in Craft examines its global history and indigenous traditions---likely two suitable contexts for the use of the word craft---at arm’s length from contemporary studio practice.

With or without craft in the equation, I was aware that defining parameters around spheres of professional practice posed challenges for the participants. Zoey stated, “I feel like I’m an artist before a designer in a way.” She described the challenge of labeling herself as being:

a difficult task. I'm learning that it's important to label yourself in terms of getting jobs. I think I'm an "idea person" just because most of my work is concept driven. Once I have a concept in mind, I utilize my craft and design skills to bring the project to life.

Lidia identified herself as a “textile artist and designer, I think. That’s kind of a weird spot where I am right now, because they’re so closely linked but they’re not at the same time.” She later explained that assigning labels to categorize her work is difficult. “I feel that I need to put these labels on myself, and then when I say it, I feel kind of funny, like I’m an artist and designer. Like I have to choose one.” Natalie expressed similar views regarding where she fit within the domains of art and design. Throughout her schooling she wondered, “am I a designer or am I an artist? Am I going to design patterns to sell textiles or am I making conceptual art?” Her views referred to both the work’s form and function. She explained, “I was torn between something flat and something three-dimensional.”
While institutional language is disclosed in participant responses, so too is the tendency towards postdisciplinarity. Adamson summarizes this drift aptly by suggesting art, design, and craft could be read as “historical points of reference rather than ongoing categories of practice” (2010, p. 457). If the constraints surrounding these domains are redundant, in my estimation, participants may not be boundary crossing as much as freely defining their practice amongst spheres that have exhausted their usefulness. Postmodernism has driven this change, breaking the walls separating artistic disciplines, and allowing makers to move freely within temporally, aesthetically, and conceptually contained spheres as they see fit.

Zoey brought a dress was from her final thesis collection to our second interview. In the work, she combined a digitally printed image of her body with a fabric of woven horsehair, chosen for its resemblance to pubic hair. The mounted dress, made from both fabrics, had been displayed as an installation in her reconstructed bedroom, illustrating her concept which pitted the private reality of “feeling the most comfortable in my own skin” against the public one that judges and condemns a woman’s body. Zoey’s work struck me as a clear illustration of Adamson’s “historical points of reference,” appropriating the vocabulary available within art, craft, and design to underscore her conceptual intent.

The responses amongst participants reflected a worldview in which disciplines may have been drained of their former relevance but are nonetheless present. Both Natalie and Lidia acknowledged the difficulty of clearly defining their practice, opting for a few descriptors to describe its range. Tanya embraced the seemingly distinct spheres of art, design, and
craft. She also described the body of work being prepared for her booth at a prominent local craft show and her workspace at a cultural organization’s craft studio. The context of her statements reflected that her tendency towards postdisciplinarity may have been tempered by the institutions that govern exhibition and marketing opportunities to which she desired access. This finding references sociologist Howard Becker’s assertion of the art world as a form of social organization (1982). Becker’s sociological approach to art production saw it as separate from individual intent or aesthetic considerations, centering instead upon the complex “networks through which art happens” (p. 1) which serve to mediate its cultural position. Tanya may have wished to define her work in a particular way, but was working within an institutional infrastructure that played a critical role in doing so.

An analysis of participant narratives reflects that despite an ideological tendency to move beyond boundaries, disciplines do exist, albeit uncomfortably. Their words may be a reflection of the fact that the field of craft, whether taken as a verb or noun, does not readily offer itself as a discipline to be casually entered. Dependent upon both an embodied and skilled approach to making, it demands a requisite technical expertise. Disciplines were wrestled with and adopted expansively, but never entirely ignored.

**early inroads and intentions**

> To generate the indispensable excitement there must be something at stake, something momentous and uncertain.

John Dewey, 1934, p. 72
My teacher had this mask, a woven mask hanging on the wall and I had to learn how to make it. He didn’t want to teach me and I said, “you have to teach me. I want to learn how to make this.”

Natalie

I embarked upon discovering emerging makers’ stories of experience by investigating their formative understandings. How they identified with a role of maker, and their initial intent in pursuing material practice helped provide me with a backdrop to their later involvement. Thematically, participants began to touch on recurrent ideas—the desire to communicate, the need for self-discovery, a wish for creative recognition, a compulsion to create—as ones that are commonly returned to in later discussions.

Long before choosing to pursue material practice academically, all five research participants expressed self-identifying as a “maker.” Tanya spoke of her parents’ influence: her mother at the sewing table and her father in his wood shop as “just part of our growing up […] we just made things that we needed.” Her involvement struck her as a natural progression, “I couldn’t help myself either. My hands just wanted to do things always, to make things.” Zoey described receiving a new box of crayons from her mother that she “[went] crazy with,” colouring on the wallpaper of her Korean apartment. She recounted the story as if it was told to her in an endearing way, marking her early forays into a childhood and adolescence filled with art and textiles practice. Alison recalled the cool basement ceramics studio where she attended summer camp as a child. It was a beloved early memory of always being “involved in some sort of making process.”

Family support was, at least in part, blatant or implied, shaping the idea of skill as intrinsic to participant identity. A distinct childhood identity as maker also laid the groundwork for future identity claims. None of the participants discovered an aspect of
their identity that was otherwise overlooked; they either continued to develop a longstanding interest, chose to revisit it after a prolonged absence.

It would be misleading, however, to assume that early identity claims were the predominant influence in participants choosing their course of study. An awareness of cultural and socio-economic demands surfaced in many of our discussions, shaping a path to post-secondary studies and beyond. Additionally, participant intentions and life experience trajectories were distinct, and contributed to respective desires for self-discovery, carving out a professional identity, attaining commercial success, and satisfying academic ambitions.

Tanya described herself as, “always [feeling] like...a designer.” Raised in a family of makers, her parents’ influence “filtered through in some way, you know, the textiles were just there and I was always so appreciative.” Without being particularly demonstrative, her parents nonetheless “appreciated” what Tanya made, much as Tanya appreciated the beautifully finished handmade clothing her mother made for her. Tanya describes her own evolution as a maker:

I always sort of looked at things like, “that could be better if it was made this way.” I couldn’t help it. I had that very critical sort of eye where I would appreciate something I saw, usually something with function, and I would think, “if it was just tweaked that way then it would really be great.” [...] [When I was] older, everything that I used were found objects that I found were almost perfect, then I would tweak them and make them just right. And it was like furniture, children’s clothing--once I
had kids—even recipes, cooking. I guess it was just a way to take it and make it work for me. I needed to redesign things that I saw, and I also liked getting my hands on things.

Tanya’s narrative suggests that as a young maker, her interest cut across disciplinary boundaries. Making was not restricted to the material categories of object making, but embraced the day-to-day environment in which her family lived. Her desire to get her “hands on things” was expressed as a facet of who she was, rather than something she was taught. Tanya reflects on the need to design or redesign by saying, “I couldn’t help myself” as if defenceless in the face of this urge.

I was struck by the centrality of family as being key to Tanya’s identity as maker, and one that played a significant role throughout my discussions with her. She described herself first as daughter and then, more pivotally and emphatically as mother. From her expansive domestic design sensibility to her intention of making “functional things that are for using within families,” to the silkscreened images of her son’s childhood drawings, I saw the theme of family as permeating her role as maker. In fact, it was a sudden turning point in her family life that led to Tanya concentrating on her design and making skills “with some intention.” Tanya said:

after I had children, I stayed at home with my kids for eleven years, and then my marriage came to an excruciating halt (laughter), and I didn’t know what I was going to do, cause I had nothing. I had no money, I had no skills, and I had lost a bit of myself, like who I was, because I was with the children and I was someone’s wife. I
just didn’t even know, so I decided to go back to school, and I didn’t even know what
I was going to do.

Tanya described post-secondary study as a reclamation of sorts. She stated, “my children
had been my creative process for so long, that I wanted to give that intention inward. I
wanted to focus that energy on what I do, and give it some determination and a
direction.” That direction, while initially unclear, was informed by Tanya’s distinct
identity as a parent. She was distinguished by the fact that she “had this kind of
experience, this raw kick in the ass that having kids gives you.” Her words gave the
impression that the boundary between her role as parent and her role as a maker was a
porous one, simply two interconnected facets of her personality.

Her route to post-secondary study was “sort of leap of faith-ish,” spurred by a desire “to
hone in on this part of myself that I knew was there and give it some time, like actually
give it some energy.” No longer defined simply by her role within the family, Tanya
stated, “I wanted to try to teach myself, you know, narrow in, or get more disciplined, and
see if I might learn something about myself that I didn’t quite know.” Confronting large
existential questions, Tanya commented, “I was in a very different place, like what should
I be doing with my life now? And I thought that maybe it might give me the answer to
that, if I paid closer attention.”

Natalie’s shifting role within her family was also a precursor to her post-secondary
studies. With her son going into grade one, she was faced with having to re-enter the
workforce. Natalie lamented “nobody would hire me because I had been out of work for
so long.” However, the prospect of upgrading her skills in Human Resources was equally
discouraging. “I couldn’t face the thought of doing what I used to do. I would have been a
very unhappy person.” Instead, she decided, “I’m going to take art. I really want to learn
more, and so I came to CAU.”

While both Tanya and Natalie were prompted by shifts in their respective families, the
intention Natalie expressed with her academic work was to acquire a broader skill set,
whereas Tanya’s aim was closer to that of self-discovery. Having taken courses in
silkscreen printing and begun a small professional practice before coming to her
undergraduate studies, Natalie was motivated by a “need to know more.” She stated, “I
wanted to learn about pattern design, and more about surface design, printing in
particular.”

In describing her background in material practice, Natalie stated:

From a very young age I was drawn to textiles and worked with them. My
grandmother and my mother taught me how to do a lot of different things like knit
and embroider and sew. And then when I was in grade school I took art. I never felt
drawn to drawing and painting. I felt like I just had no skill at it. But my teacher had
this mask, a woven mask hanging on the wall and I had to learn how to make it. He
didn’t want to teach me and I said, “you have to teach me.” I want to learn how to
make this. Finally he taught me, and that was it. I was off-loom weaving. I made these
masks for years.
I understood Natalie’s early involvement with making to include textile construction and textile techniques, but also a perception of them as entirely separate from the field of art, which was characterized by drawing and painting. She expressed viewing clear divisions between artistic disciplines, and while some seemed to soften over time, the way they were referenced in conversation throughout illustrated they were present enough to be wrestled with. Despite her confidence in a range of skills related to textile construction and embellishment, as well as a budding professional practice prior to her post-secondary studies, Natalie stated, “but I still didn’t think it was art, you see.”

Natalie and Tanya were also united in their desire to get a university degree. Tanya presented this goal as an important personal milestone (“I felt like I really would feel good if I got a degree”), whereas Natalie saw it, in part, as a value distinction between CAU and the two other non-degree granting post-secondary institutions to which she had been accepted. Attending a university also challenged Natalie’s perceptions of her academic ability. She commented, “Oh my god, it’s a university, and I couldn’t believe they accepted me. I really couldn’t. I didn’t think I was university material.”

The importance of receiving an undergraduate degree was a topic that surfaced in many conversations, despite the fact that I had never raised it. Its significance points, in part, towards postindustrial cultural currents that have placed increasing emphasis on theoretical knowledge, and by extension, the credentials conferred by higher education. Somewhat ironically, the laboured act of material practice was being contextualized within a set of beliefs that devalues manual labour and prizes the academic recognition that is
afforded with degrees. The responses of some of the participants reflected the socio-cultural and occasionally the economic capital of degree attainment.

Combining a hands-on experience with a university degree was also a key consideration for Lidia. She enrolled at CAU, after graduating from a three-year textiles program at a college in the same province “which gave me a diploma, and then I came back to CAU to get a degree.” She described her initial response to the repetitive course content as “frustrating,” but her priority at the beginning was “just to get my degree and to have some studio space to work.” While the experience evolved into one that became increasingly meaningful and educative, the importance of the degree did not diminish. Lidia stated:

[When] graduating, you have to choose a bachelor of design or art, and I chose design even though a lot of what I did was artwork, but I figured for any jobs in the future, if I were to go that route, that it would be better suited as a description of myself.

Lidia never questioned that she would be a maker. Initially lured by the programs of ceramics and furniture at her previous institution, she subsequently transferred into textiles. However, the medium was always secondary to the methodology. “I’ve always been very hands-on, and [textiles] just happened to be the medium I majored in.” While she expressed flexibility in her creative approach, her chosen practices were all materials based. Lidia stated:
It made more sense. I don’t know if that means anything, but it made more sense to do something [with my hands]. I have always enjoyed working with my hands. My mom would always get me to fix things in the house. It was kind of something I was drawn to.

A formative push towards a job with financial security may have been equally as strong. While Lidia felt supported by her mother, she stated,

My father was not happy about what I was doing, and I think still to this day the first question that comes out of his mouth is how are you going to make money? Because it brings you back to money, which is something that you need to do these things. For some people I think it’s more important than what you do.”

The importance of academic achievement was reflected in the experience recounted by Zoey. Although always drawn towards visual arts, she stated, “I had put so much pressure on myself [in high school] thinking, oh I have to go to Queen’s with everybody else, and that’s a hard school to get into, but it makes no sense for me to go there.”

Following a year at a Vancouver-based college in which she developed an “understanding of what conceptual art is all about,” Zoey was inspired to apply to CAU, seeing the department of Material Art and Design as “a really good stepping stone. I thought it would build a very great foundation for me.” Her interest in conceptual art prior to CAU established a desire for the critical acclaim of having her work recognized and appreciated. At the same time, she expressed interest in the technical aspects of the program, having touched on similar content during earlier courses in fashion design.
Alison had also completed a year-long post-secondary program before coming to CAU. The fashion courses she took were an extension of a longstanding affinity with making. Once finished, Alison said, “I knew that it wasn’t enough. I realized that I was interested in the very beginnings of it all. How did the material get made?” She described learning about fabric in a fashion context, stating:

there was absolutely nothing that touched on the beginnings of where the fabric itself [...] came from, how it was made, how it was dyed. And I remember her just burning samples for us, and us smelling them me thinking, oh, I never really thought about this before.

At the age of 23, Alison’s decision to come to CAU emerged from a deep-seated curiosity and a thirst for more knowledge. She stated, “I knew from day one when I applied that I wanted to be in the MAAD program.” Unlike Tanya and Lidia, the medium dictated the decision. Alison described herself as “dead set on taking textiles at CAU.” Her early intent was to broaden her repertoire of skills in order to “start something” of her own. Alison stated, “I knew entering CAU that I didn’t want to work for somebody else. I felt like I had a lot of ideas in me, and I didn’t necessarily know how to get them out properly.” Instead of wanting the degree to open doors, Alison expressed interest in the experience opening avenues for her own creative possibilities.
Alison’s narrative touches upon Stratton and Leeman’s notion of agency, and the potential for craft methodology to “once again have a pivotal role to play in how humans orient themselves to current cultural conditions” (2010, para. 3). Alison expressed a need to set herself apart. “I wouldn’t want to sign on to some sort of creative agency where my creative output was being taken by someone else”, she explained, linking the notion of agency to a harnessing of material skills. The relationship between making and agency was also asserted by Tanya and Natalie as they both sought an identity separate from their family roles through creative practice. Tanya’s claim to have “lost” something of herself as a wife and mother prompted the quest to retrieve a forgotten sense of autonomy. If “what and how we make defines who we are, and communicates who we want to be” (Charny, 2011, About Making section, para. 1), this describes Tanya’s goal for her post-secondary studies.

Importantly, the notion of making and agency is not in the exclusive purview of craft, but a sweeping attribute applied to many fields of creative practice. Dewey (1934) claimed that the “expression of the self, in and through a medium” resulted in a transformation of both the artwork and the self (p. 67). Sociomusicologist Simon Frith (1996) contended that the aesthetic experience of music “constructs our central identity through the direct experiences it offers of the body” (p. 124). Could it be that the notion of agency is, in fact inherent to all creative activity?

Thematically, the early inroads sketch out broad objectives held by participants as they headed towards their post-secondary studies. Before fleshing out this experience,
it’s worth acknowledging an important aspect of narrative inquiry as a framework for participants to interpret experience. Questions around formative influences and intentions demanded they reflect on sometimes decades-old occurrences from the vantage point of the present-day. Reissman’s contention that “narratives do not mirror, they refract the past” acknowledges that notions of truth are subject to “shifting connections they forge amongst past, present, and future” (2005, p.7).

Echoing a postmodern position that there is no single truth to unearth, nor is there an objective standpoint to which one might aspire, the participants are disclosing temporal and evolving understandings as they make sense of their experience. They are transmitting snapshots of their lives as they contextualize experience through filters of what has come both before and after.

**answering an unarticulated need: the sensory encounter**

> At the centre of the human project, art making is [...] our primary means of self-transformation.

Susan Stewart, 2011, p. 7

> I feel like when I’m working, the time that’s going by is exactly as it should be.

Tanya

The sensory, emotional, and physical engagement involved in material practice has received growing critical attention. Whereas Gaskell (1836), Morris (1888), and Ruskin (1905) emphasized links between making and morality—their responses reflecting a social outcry against industry—some theorists currently frame the field as one in which making is linked with meaning (Charny, 2011; Koplos, 2002; Metcalf, 2002, 2007; Owen, 2011).

Whether a response to social or economic uncertainty (like, “Madame Defarge knitting her way through the French Revolution,” Owen, 2011, p. 95), a means of fixing what has been
broken and cut (Jefferies, 2011, p. 226), countering the sterility of experience (Potvin, 2007), or seeking a meditative encounter (Charny, 2011), making has emerged as a site of embodied understanding. Again, there is an opponent; this time craft is pitted against the commonly aggressive digital tools and the technological environments they inhabit that dullen sensory experience and curb a spectrum of affective interaction.

The participants reflected a notion of making as both a desirable and a potentially transformative act. It was one in which rational cognition gave way to embodied experience. As Zoey described it, “I don’t think I’m thinking so much. My practice, what I’m doing, it’s repetitive first of all, so once you get into the groove of it you just zone out [...] it’s a good zoning out. It’s therapeutic, I think.” Alison expressed similar feelings, “I feel very content. Sometimes it can almost be a little bit of a tedious feeling if it’s something that I repeat over and over, but I just feel very content. [...] I feel that I get so much contentment from it that I almost feel guilty sometimes.”

Lidia describes being “on a bit of a different level emotionally or consciously when I’m making something. I’m not really worried about anything else around me.” She later described the emotional shift that occurs while working. “I love the process. I think it’s beautiful when I’m doing it. Because there are days when I don’t want to go to the studio, I don’t want to do anything, then I go and I do it and my mood changes. My thoughts towards it change. I know once I get there and I start making something or doing something I’ll feel the encouragement from myself to make more.”
While psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) labeled the focused and positive experiences participants recount to characterize their working state as “flow,” John Dewey (1934) uses the word “flow” to describe successive and linked stages of an aesthetic experience (p. 38). The “experience” of making denotes an energized response to uninterrupted immersion in an activity in which meanings drawn from previous experiences coalesce with those of the present (“if we imagine a stone which is rolling down hill...” p. 41) Perceptual responsiveness is key, and the senses unite with the hand as “instruments through which the entire live creature...operates” (p. 52).

Tanya reflected this conception of experience when reminiscing about a memorable course that she took during her studies. She stated, “I felt that my energy was in all of my physical senses and my intellectual senses. It was everything all at once. Everything felt whole, and I felt aware of it all, and that’s kind of the ultimate, that feeling. Like this is a moment where I feel really [in tune] with who I am.” The course was conducted in a “deliberate direction that I felt made me feel more aware and mindful...aware of my senses.” Tanya elaborates on the experience of this experience in the following way:

Okay, when I’m working, [...] I feel like I’m connected with time in the most realistic way, more so than when I’m doing anything else. Time seems so relative depending on what you’re doing. [...] I feel like when I’m working, the time that’s going by is exactly as it should be. It’s not flying by or it’s not going too slow. It’s just perfect

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17 Dewey described an experiential continuum that was fundamental to the act of making, “In an experience, flow is from something to something. As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctiveness in itself” (1934, p. 38)
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(laughter). You know, an hour is that long. I sometimes still run out of time. I wish I
had more, but I feel very connected with the time.

Seductive as it may be to allow sensory and embodied responses to trump all other
concerns, it would not be an accurate picture of the participants’ views. While Alison
stated, “at the end of the day, I just really want to be making stuff” there were a range of
practical and contextual criteria for this making to take place. Tanya’s experience of
mindfulness was countered by the concrete logistics of raising and supporting a family. In
other words, while the sensory experience of making was identified as a meaningful one,
it took its place amongst priorities of producing distinctive work, speaking to a supportive
public, and receiving critical recognition.

Natalie’s perspective offers a valuable counterpoint to a romanticized lure of embodied
practice. When asked to reflect on her affective response to her current role as maker,
Natalie said, “I’m fighting it right now. […] All I’m thinking about is fit. I hate that. I hate
sewing. I hate it with a passion.” Building on her fourth-year thesis work, Natalie
elaborated that she felt the same way while in school. “I hated it for my thesis project, but
I had to do it. I had to cover the girls up, right? So that’s part of the whole idea. I had a
concept and I had to do whatever it takes to make that happen.” Her unenthusiastic
response to her current role as maker was countered by an unbridled enthusiasm for
working within her collaborative team, having the support of peers and faculty, and
realizing her conceptual intent for the dancers. Satisfaction was derived despite the process
rather than as a result of it.
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craft and situated cognition

Craft is a means for logically thinking through senses.

Nithikul Nimkulrat, 2010, p. 75

So each time it gets a little bit better, or I try different things with the placement of the sensors and types of sounds. So now here we are.

Natalie

Whether or not the experience of making was identified as fulfilling or emotionally transformative, participants touched on the physical act as a requisite mode of knowledge production. The tacit skill on which craft depends has been theorized as a layered endeavour involving both experiential learning and reflection (Ruskin, 1853; Morris, 1888; Pye, 1978). Dewey (1934) advocated for an experiential continuum, which encompassed both the affective and the intellectual, and promoting the possibility of symbiotic development.

Philosopher Donald Schön (1991) built on the ideas of Ruskin and Dewey in his writings on reflective practice. He describes “surprises” that present themselves in the process of a practitioner executing tacit knowledge. These unexpected occurrences can lead to either new understandings, or a full reconsideration of the challenge itself. Applied to the field of material practice, such understandings might point to new directions for how to handle a material in a particular context or refine a technique; they may equally point to possibilities for developing a concept for a body of work or shifting directions entirely.

Lidia addressed the notion of surprises in tacit knowledge and their ability to arrive at new understandings as she reflected on her thesis work. Using pigeons as her “muse” she
began a concentrated period of experimentation “working with different techniques, open
screen techniques. I think what I was doing is I was just playing around because I had no
idea what I was doing at all.” Accepting the premise that her own execution and reflection
would direct her, she stated that her ideas emerged from the process of making:

just picking something and sticking to it and researching it and seeing where it can
go. And I think physically making things over and over and over again and printing
and trying to figure where it’s going to go but in trying to do that you’re just making
more and more things. Trying to figure out this problem or the avenue you want to
take.

While the direction for Lidia’s work emerged from embodied practice, ensuing ideas
emerged from the work that resulted. When considering her current paper-cut artwork,
Lidia stated, “this is the stuff that I enjoy, and where I get my ideas from.” She described
the paper-cuts to be, “more personally satisfying [...] in the story that I’m trying to tell. I
don’t know what that story is until it all comes together.”

I understood the description of Lidia’s practice to be one in which her hands led the way,
reflection followed, and a new understanding resulted. It was the very process of “playing
and playing” that led to a conceptual direction for her thesis body of work, rather than the
other way around. Her description of making as an active way of thinking touches on
curator Daniel Charny’s conception as “something which can be carried out with no
particular goal in mind. In fact, this is a situation where innovation is very likely to occur”
(2011, Thinking by Making section, para. 1).
The notion of making as knowledge production reflects the stance of phenomenologically inclined makers and theorists. Philosopher Martin Heidegger pointed the way for Maurice Merleau-Ponty by challenging the Cartesian construct that separates a human subject who thinks versus a human object who doesn’t. Merleau-Ponty, in turn, described all knowledge as being embodied, our bodies belonging to ourselves as well as to that of the outside world (1945). At once the perceiver experiencing knowledge, as well as the perceived observing this knowledge, the body unifies the two experiences into a synthesized whole, embedding the notion of knowing in our physical selves. Sociologist Richard Sennett (2008) describes “making as thinking” in his writing on craft (p. ix). In an homage to Merleau-Ponty, Sennett states, “When we focus on making a physical object, or on playing a musical instrument, our concentration level is mainly self-directed. In a social context, focusing on the concrete and particular is shaped by our interactions with other people. They situate us...this is what the whole idea of situated cognition is about” (Sennett as cited in Ramljak, 2010, p. 2).

Tanya described her hands always “want[ing] to do things always, to make things...” as if they too led the way to understanding. She stated, “the first time I screen-printed my own yardage was one of the most magical feelings, like lifting that screen off the second one to do a repeat and seeing it work, and watching it all unfold.” While Lidia allowed embodied practice to determine her direction, Tanya, at times, held preconceived attitudes that were overturned by physical experience. Despite not wanting to learn how to dye, the skill “brought me closer to feeling like a magician than anything else.” Tanya describes the process of setting up a loom as:
one of the most mindful moments, stringing it, and even making a mistake and having to undo it and redo it again, and the time it takes. I got close to math, and I was terrible at math student. It made me feel like I could understand numbers in a different way.

Tanya welcomed the surprises (“I love it when I’m wrong”), positioning a reflective embodied practice as that which led the way to new understanding.

Alison described a pivotal incident that shaped her learning at CAU.

I think one of my biggest moments that really sort of helped shape my personal philosophy in making anything was when I…bought some silk [...] and I guess it wasn’t all silk, but I was doing the shibori technique with the big black plastic tubing. So I’d followed all the steps and I got the demo, and I really thought that I was making this beautiful dark green scarf that was going to have all these beautiful resist lines through it, and it did not work out at all. The very top layer that was immersed in the dye got dyed and nothing else absorbed the dye. [...] And I remember just sort of snapping and saying to myself, okay Alison, you really messed up. Whatever went wrong, it doesn’t matter anymore. This thing is due tomorrow, and you messed it up. And I was really close to chucking it, and I thought to myself, why would I chuck it? This is a huge step in my learning and I messed something up. I’m going to hold onto this, and I’m going to write down an intense diary of exactly what I did.
On one hand, Alison described this leap in her “personal philosophy of making” as “a huge moment.” On the other, she was forced to defend the pedagogical merit of a perceived “failure” within the course she was taking. Alison explained the rationale behind this being an educative incident, “So in three years when I want to do this again, I can read over this and see what I don’t want to do, or how I might have messed that up. And that’s exactly what I did. I handed [it] in.” When reflecting upon her choice to submit work that was not aesthetically “successful,” Alison stated, “Why wouldn’t I? Because this is something that I’ve learned. [...] yeah, I did make a mistake, and it’s very obvious, and a bad mistake, but that’s okay.”

Alison’s anecdote illustrated to me the challenges of putting embodied learning into practice within an institutional setting that has its own prescriptive set of requirements. It also draws, in part, on Schön’s conception of surprise. The surprise in the physical execution was the first step in the educative process: the second was defending its value. Alison’s learning occurred as a result of, but counter to, curriculum expectations that demanded a cleanly executed body of work.

Within the participant group, the embodied act of making was seen by some as one that opens pathways to understanding and discovery. This includes being a source of idea generation, providing direction for a body of work, dispelling preconceived attitudes, and building a repertoire of techniques free from value judgment. Tanya’s description of her affective reaction to a course in which her “physical” and “intellectual” senses were energized was “the ultimate” feeling for her. Importantly, not all participants assigned the same emphasis to this stage. The notion of making as thinking was a perspective that was
important to some, yet decidedly individual. Others placed an emphasis on a work’s conceptual intent being supreme and guiding all decisions in its execution. As well, with a move towards postdisciplinarity, some participants expressed that an expansive technical repertoire beyond the realm of fibre would be an asset, necessarily sacrificing depth for breadth. While untested, the shift away from specialization could alter a maker’s proficiency in thinking through materials. These are important views to consider when assessing making in an educational context, covered in the final data analysis chapter.
Chapter five: Craft in a postindustrial landscape

The economic and societal contextualization of material practice occurs in the following three sections. *Obstacles and opportunities* reflects on the hurdles described by participants alongside the more promising seeds that are “implanting themselves in the cracks of the industrial foundation” (Hunt, 2005). An emerging conception of postindustrialism is examined in *object and audience: the search for authenticity*, recognizing the quest for meaningful objects and production methods as an essential corollary of postindustrial conditions. Lastly, *collaborative models* looks at new communities that have grown out of such conditions, as makers move from a modernist conception of artist as genius, and towards one that is commonly less isolated and self-sufficient.

**obstacles and opportunities**

*The industrial mode of production is just a rotting old carcass, decomposing but still taking up space.*

Jamer Hunt, 2005, p. 1

*I’m really interested in examining why I want to make this stuff. Why am I so drawn to making stuff when there is so much stuff already?*

Alison

Daniel Bell (1973) prophesized a postindustrial society in which fundamental changes to economic structure went hand in hand with other demographic, political, and societal shifts. While particular aspects have not evolved exactly according to Bell’s projections, his forecast of a postindustrialist society that permeated broad spheres of social and cultural life was prescient. The current societal picture in North American cities is widely
understood to be one driven by a young, highly educated technocracy primarily involved in the fields of research, science, and innovation. There is a widespread regard for technological growth, speed, and theoretical as opposed to practical knowledge. For emerging makers this can present an altogether bleak picture.

The transition from undergraduate training to professional practice was overwhelmingly ridden with external obstacles, according to participants. The high degree of economic capital bestowed on universities, and its resulting steep tuition costs, left most financially squeezed. Some participants were burdened by student debt and the need to seek paid income in an unrelated field. In addition to money representing a “huge obstacle” according to Alison, there was a common awareness of scant ready-made employment opportunities for those in their field.

When I asked Zoey if she was hoping to financially sustain herself through her artwork, she responded, “I think I’ve seen too many artists and too many designers [to know] that it doesn’t really happen that way. So my viewpoint is a bit more realistic. I know that I can’t make money off of this and sustain myself off it.” Despite the fact that she had undertaken two industry related internships, she understood the competition she was facing in the unpaid employment alone, and the dearth of economic prospects beyond. Tanya expressed feeling emotionally supported by her family, but “completely vulnerable” financially, dependent on a part-time job and a small amount of income from her ex-husband to offset her expenses. “Time is tricky,” she elaborated. “I have time challenges, but they’re linked with money. They’re linked with finances. Cause I have to find ways to make money when I actually want to be doing what I’m working on.” Collectively,
financial constraints dictated living situations, lack of studio space, inability to purchase materials, precarious technical support, dependence on unrelated employment, and an insidious awareness of longterm financial insecurity.

Sadly, emerging makers are positioning themselves within neoliberal economies that are characterized by a hungry consumer culture to which they have limited access. Unbridled abundance of tariff-free offshore goods has propelled a dependency on consumption, and a concurrent emphasis on speed has fuelled a demand for fast, cheap production of goods. The field of textiles is particularly burdened with a legacy of ills, as evidenced in the prevalence of fast fashion in which a design sketch can become a cut-rate finished garment on the shelves of an H&M in as little as three weeks.18 While participants shared a common concern regarding financial obstacles, some were equally concerned about how they could contribute to material culture in a meaningful way. Lidia described her response to a course she took as a student on the history of making through design, architecture, and objects. “Why am I making anything?” she thought to herself at the time, “Why am I here in this school? There’s so much garbage and things that exist and I didn’t really understand why I was going back to school to make more things. That was something that really hit home for me.”

Alison also looked at the notoriously fickle fashion industry in which she wished to insert herself, and commented, “I’m really examining how much stuff is being made and how

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18 While H&M and Zara are commonly singled out as corporate perpetrators of fast fashion, the practice of producing speedy low-cost clothing in poor countries is the norm rather than the exception. Its vertically integrated supply chain is designed to respond quickly to trends, offering low cost options to more traditional manufacturing methods. Fast fashion currently represents a trillion dollar global industry. (Cline, 2012).
people are consuming those things, like what is the relationship [of the object] to someone who purchases something? What is the designer thinking when they make something?”

Alison’s words echo Henrik Most’s quest for authenticity in a world of things. She expressed seeking a meaningful role that would take her beyond the trend forecasting, assertions of ego, and fleeting popularity of fabrics. “I’m really interested in examining why I want to make this stuff. Why am I so drawn to making stuff when there is so much stuff already?”

The economic drivers shaping postindustrialism emphasize consumption while excising manufacturing, yet the term encompasses socio-cultural priorities as well as economic ones. As such, it represents a paradigm that cannot be fixed, but is inherently evolving. Alison’s existential conundrum may reflect the concerns of her undergraduate peers as it may also reflect those of the micro-business owners establishing themselves within an emerging economy. The black and white taxonomic division that has moved manufacturing out of North America and onto foreign soil may have resulted in abandoned car part factories and pharmaceutical manufacturers, but has created both a desire and market for meaningful options to counter a bottomless supply of disposable consumer goods.

**object and audience: the search for authenticity**

Importantly, the level of affluence on which postindustrialism depends commonly results in the subsistence-level concerns of health care, food, and shelter being replaced by quality of life values (Link, 2009). Alongside popular societal notions of subjective well-being and a quest for meaningful employment, there is a prevalent interest in environmental
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concerns and spiritual fulfilment (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). The Portland-based artisanal economy identified by Heying emerged, in part, out of a current conception of postindustrialism, and one that has grown from the ashes of de-industrialization: a desire for a connection between producer and consumer, a rejection of mass conformity advanced by trade deregulation, an emphasis on socially meaningful work, and a growing importance placed on local production (Ponder, 2010; Thompson, 2010). Researcher C.S. Ponder (2010) claims that the meaning of making has qualitatively changed as a result of this context, stating that more than defining oneself as a cheesemaker or glassblower, artisan practice signals that “a person has stepped outside the confines of modern relations of production” (p. 11). While this may be a dubious premise, it holds significant allure for a particular profile of consumer who seeks to be identified with altruistic spending—coveting Benjamin’s aura of authenticity in the marketplace. Though not at the hub of a knowledge economy, the artisan-based micro-businesses operate with varying degrees of effectiveness at its sidelines. Entrepreneurial in nature, and patronized by particular sectors of the population, such businesses are not just within the modern relations of production, but represent a steadily growing part of it.

Alison spoke of the sample work she was doing as reflecting her interest in “practical applications of repurposing clothing or things that are kind of like tattered and ratty and

\[19\] Ponder specifies that occasional involvement with an artisan economy has certainly existed throughout the modern era. An artisan economy is distinguished by growing numbers of people who “start to remove themselves for sustained periods of time, or more often and through an increasing variety of means and ways” (Ponder, 2010, p. 11). An artisan economy is closely related to the movement of New Urbanism that embraces mixed use neighbourhoods, public transportation, sustainability, and quality of life. While the two ideologies share many guiding principles, the New Urbanism adopts the perspective of a city’s citizenry.
not really that wearable anymore, and then repurposing them into garments that could be worn just a little bit longer.” The idea of redirecting a garment’s lifecycle with an alternative end-use in mind propelled her, “I have [the garment] at its beginning but where does it end, and how does it end?” As a counter to the pace and disposability of fast fashion, Alison said, “if I’m going to be making something for someone to enjoy, it’s going to be something that they can look at and say, wow, this object is going to last. It will become more of a fixture in their life rather than something disposable, because of an aspect of quality.”

Not only would Alison rethink the garment’s lifecycle, but she would want to share her design process with her audience. Alison stated:

Yeah, I’ve often thought that when it does come time for me to be producing a small line of functional items, that I do feel I want the viewer to know how it was made, and if I have to print off little cards that explain that, as a packaging detail, or whatever it is...I’ve always thought that I wanted the person to know where stuff came from. Like if it’s a sweater, where did the wool come from, because that’s something I always want to know. [...] Did it come from an old sweater that I reknit? Did it come from some wool that I purchased online that I later found out was sourced ethically from Peru? I want the person to know that, and I think people in general should be more aware of these things, and I think if you can pass that onto your user or viewer or whoever, that would be something that I would want them to know.
Lidia spoke of distinguishing her work from that which was mass-marketed. “I think the most important aspect of my work right now is creating a style that people can understand, they can see and know that it’s my work. It’s like a signature almost.” Rather than adapt her printed fabrics to market trends, she stated, “I want them to be identified with me and the way that I work, and I want to really, not narrow it down, but have that show in my work. It doesn’t have to be so specific all the time in maybe the technique that I use, but I want it to read as mine.” She spoke of the tension between uncurbed material culture and the continued desire to make things as “two opposite ideas or feelings.” She stated:

you’re making a lot of things, and feeling you’re on a roll of doing whatever it is, and then not wanting to make anything at all because there’s no point, but things are still going to be made nonetheless. I guess it’s how you make them though. [...] If there’s a deeper meaning in my work, it’s something that may last for a longer time. Or if I’m marketing a product, it’s not something that would be thrown out.

An audience that is sympathetic to small-scale production or DIY practices was viewed as a positive trend by Lidia who stated:

I feel happy when I see people making and doing these things, like I’m on the right track. I’m in a good spot. And I think that there’s going to be an audience that will understand what I’m doing because that’s what’s being created by people who make in general. So, it’s pretty exciting.”
Similar to Alison, informing an audience of the process in which her textiles were made was an attractive possibility for Lidia. She stated:

I think it would be great if people knew what was going into what was being created. I use a lot of dye as well in my work, so there’s chemistry that goes in, aside from the whole design aspect of what I’m creating, it’s the physical labour that goes into creating these things, that I think I would like them to know.

Tanya described her work in response to mass market availability. She explained her desire to provide options for industrially produced garments that don’t always accommodate the needs of their target audience. Tanya described the intent of her work as:

redesigning something that’s already there, and bringing it to your attention, you know like the clothes making more sense in terms of movability, or [taking children’s] drawings and bringing them into something that you use like a handbag or into your housewares, your bedding. So taking these things and then repurposing them in a different way. [...] Everything’s great, but I just think it could be a little bit better, if families were just given [...] more options with things that are already out there. It’s just hard to find.

When asked what she would like the viewer to know, Tanya’s responses were both practical and affective in nature. In addition to describing “the recipe that exists in all of her work” as making personally meaningful products of durable quality, there is a deep
level of satisfaction that she would wish to communicate to the viewer, “I would like them
to know how much I enjoy making it. How much joy it brings me. That’s the only thing I
can think of.”

Natalie’s wearable technology for dancers has garnered critical attention as well as
funding dollars for her to design and fabricate custom devices that cannot be found
elsewhere. Her interest in the adaptation of what exists as well as interaction with end-
users has incited the support of her peers. She stated, “I think part of what I think is really
wonderful is that there’s an interest in what I’m doing, and people want to be part of it.”
While products existed in the marketplace that enabled dancers’ bodies to make music,
Natalie expressed that she was enabling a new and affordable method of them doing so.
Natalie stated:

I feel like the most important part of what I’m doing is to try to make it accessible to
more people, or to dance companies that couldn’t afford to hire all these researchers
to make it happen for them. Because that’s the way it is now. Dance companies need
to get grants to hire the software people, electrical engineers, and costume designers
to make it all happen. So I want this to be affordable, and maybe not super
sophisticated, but it’s sort of an introduction for dancers and others who want to
explore movement and sound.

The participants identified a range of attributes in their work that distinguished them from
mass produced goods. To varying degrees, the nature of this distinction was a central
message all wished to communicate to the viewer. Their design decisions, personal
philosophy, labelling information, and consideration of materials and processes, were intended to underscore the degree to which their work stood apart or challenged industrial production. Even the fulfilment Tanya expressed was a notable counterpoint to the faceless connotations of material culture. All conveyed wanting to forge a connection between the object and the viewer or consumer that transcended what was currently being marketed.

The participants reflect the stance expressed in Jamer Hunt’s Industrial Design Manifesto (2005) in which he explains the advantage of postindustrial design “working in the shadow of industrial design’s legacy.” Identifying the true cost of industrial production as that which produced standardized goods, mass conformity, and hyperconsumption, he rhetorically asks, “Who wants a transnational, focus-tested, homogeneous megacorporation to design their stuff anyway?” (para. 16). The notion of resistance is an evocative one. Standing in opposition to the ruthless sweep of a neoliberal economy that stratifies rich and poor becomes a key impulse in the public imagination, the DIY movement, and the sentiment of emerging makers. In this respect, Lidia’s desire to embed a “deeper meaning” in her work and Tanya’s wish to create work that is “personally meaningful” reflect a growing consumer demand for them to do precisely that.

While these makers and consumers may position themselves as resistant to the global conglomerates that drive postindustrial culture, they are nonetheless connected to them, gaining a sympathetic audience as a counterpoint to global capitalist systems without fundamentally changing the structures that propel them. A postindustrial emphasis on speed and malleability, coupled with the requisite affluence, has fostered the promise of
abundance, leisure, and self-determination (Dunham-Jones, 2000). It is these very conditions of postindustrialism that have fuelled an emerging sector of economic and cultural production that challenges such priorities, promoting that which is slow, meaningful, local and distinct. As such, this creative sector resists the workings of postindustrialism while is simultaneously dependent upon the public interest it has fostered. Cornel West (1990) refers to this perspective within cultural production as “the politics of difference” in which distinctive features include, “trash[ing] the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity” (p. 257). In an attempt to align themselves with factions of the population who desire social action, cultural workers find themselves in an impossible predicament of critiquing the institutions that they are simultaneously dependent upon.

A quest for authenticity within a world of things can be traced to 1960s counterculture in which a groundswell of dissent stemming from a profound disillusionment with governing institutions erupted to challenge Western capitalist underpinnings. The New Left sought redress for the alienation created by industrialized society and the duplicitous nature of its foreign relations, offered by a culture of authenticity. Indeed, Link (2009) argues that the postindustrial society that found its roots in this period “was a new way of thinking and acting which arose from a counterculture revolution brought about by a changing society and societal mindset” (p. 2). At the other extreme, Hunt (2005) comments that as young makers, “we are not simply upgrading the familiar.” In the shadow of an

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20 The intent is not to erroneously describe a uniformly healthy level of affluence, but to acknowledge the extent to which an affluent segment of the population is able to influence particular market sectors. Ellen Dunham-Jones (2000) points out that postindustrialism’s “dark side” is the “ever-widening gap between rich and poor” (p. 26).
unrestrained industrialist past, contemporary creative production is “as different from the artisanal mode of production that it supplanted” (para. 6).

**communities and collaborations**

> For craft to survive in the face of overt consumerism, [...] it must embrace the legacy of its own origin; community and shared interaction.

Rafael Cardoso, 2008, p. 330

> When I was just working on this by myself, I had the electrical engineer and the software guy, but the whole critiquing thing was gone. I didn’t have anyone to talk to any more.

Natalie

Affiliations amongst communities of makers have been intrinsic to the modern history of craft since William Morris (1888) aspired to create an alliance of “workmen” (p. 150). Commonly, modernist models followed disciplinary lines dictated by the studio craft movement. Practitioners that work in glass, wood, or ceramics, for example, have assembled into something of a shared group through media-specific exhibition opportunities, retail venues, workshops, or journals. These communities, in turn, adopt their own specialized vocabulary, appoint their own icons, and, to a reasonable degree, create their own values and directives. Researcher Dennis Stevens (2011) describes this modernist taxonomy as one propagated by baby boomer makers in positions of authority, and one which is currently challenged by emerging makers who “cut their teeth on the tenets of post-modernism” (p. 49).

Messing with long-held boundaries that delineate spheres of practice includes both a shift towards de-disciplinary making as well as problematizing language around larger domains of practice -- art, craft, design to name but three — that have already been
addressed in this paper. Models for creative production that move away from a single creator to a collaborative network also challenge the modernist framing of artist as genius. The Ontario Art’s Council *Craft Sector Review* (2010) identified a new proliferation of collaborations within the craft sector as a means of capitalizing on options for production and marketing, as well as that of exchanging skill sets. Others have suggested that to limit a conception of making to the experience, vision, and mastery of an autonomous maker is both regressive and impractical (Cardoso, 2008). Collaborations may be viewed as opportunities to pair makers or, just as commonly, unite makers with non-makers in order to bring the necessary skill to the table.

Natalie’s wearable dancewear depends on an infrastructure of skilled workers participating in a collaborative undertaking. She stated:

> My research project is to develop a system for dancers that allows them to create music as they move. So what that involves is software which I don’t have a lot of expertise at so I’ve hired someone to help me design that, and then the wearable sensors which is what I’m designing, and I have an electrical engineer who is helping me design the circuit for the actual electronics to make it as wearable as possible.

In addition to the software designer and electrical engineer, Natalie works alongside a costume designer, choreographer, and the dancers themselves. Natalie stated:

> I like working with people [...] I like the whole collaborative thing, and sharing ideas. I just find, when I was just working on this by myself, I had the electrical engineer and
the software guy, but the whole critiquing thing was gone. I didn’t have anyone to talk to any more.

The collaboration occurs amongst those on her team; it also continues to inform the work when their job is done, and “it becomes part of someone else’s creative art/craft/design project.”

While Natalie relied on an infrastructure of collaborators to advance her project, Zoey spoke of the important role played by a community of CAU alumni, “a particular group of people who are passionate about what they’re doing.”

One was published in New York Times magazine, which is great. I’m so supportive of them for having that drive, and I really do try to surround myself with people who are continuing on with their practice, just because they’re the ones fuelling me, and reminding me, okay I need to keep going. And we’re always in discussion saying, “Hey why don’t we have a show together?” A lot of collaboration work can be made, and I kind of do have a monkey-see monkey-do personality. If I don’t do [artwork] for a long time, I go crazy and I feel really depressed, and I need to make something. But when there’s other encouragement, that really gets me going, and I kind of strive for that.

As a self-described maker, Lidia described herself as having a broad range of disciplinary interests, however making functional items from her hand-printed fabrics was not high among them. She stated, “I am a maker, but it seems like I have to take things to the next
step, which doesn’t appeal to me very much. I like the idea of surface design.” Equally appealing was the idea of collaborating with someone for the “next step.”

The participants described communities of peers offering emotional as well as practical support. Lidia expressed valuing the feedback received from makers in her shared studio in the same way she valued that of her former school peers. Before a recent exhibition of studio members, she suggested holding an informal group critique. Lidia explained:

because I need to talk to someone about what I’m doing, because sometimes you’re just going and going and going and you don’t really show anyone what you’re doing. They kind of see what you’re doing, but they don’t know what you’re doing exactly.

Like Zoey and Lidia, Tanya expressed valuing community affiliation, describing her shared studio as “so much more than I thought it was going to be.” The studio head was “like having a mother who’s just there to make things happen for you. And being surrounded by the other artists in the studio, it’s really inspiring.” Similarly, Natalie spoke of the absence in losing her community at the end of school when, “the whole critiquing thing was gone. I didn’t have anyone to talk to anymore.” Bi-weekly critique meetings at the research lab in which she works have filled that void. “I had no idea how I ended up part of that, but I am, and they’re great. Oh my god.”

A renewed emphasis on community affiliation allows us to reconsider notions of agency and resistance in three key ways. First, it underscores the rupture between the studio craft paradigm that reveres the solo maker and that of the present-day. In its embrace of the
modernist notion of artist as genius, practitioners within studio craft upheld a belief in the autonomous art object and its accompanying critical reception. The allure of this cultural conception of the artist was understandable, yet ill-fitting and divisive, as craft was “shoe-horned into the Cinderella slipper of fine art” (Fariello, 2011, p. 23). Meanwhile, modernist discourse served to erase much of the inherent nature of craft: its sensory properties, materiality, ubiquity, humility, and utility. While far from extinguished, studio craft has given way to an interconnected, at times anonymous, web of creators. Changing this paradigm severs a key connection to craft’s modernist heritage.

If the reverence of the solo maker is moving towards obsolescence, the authority of the art gallery may be shifting alongside it. Textile icon Ed Rossbach is credited with bringing globally overlooked textile construction practices to a North American art market in the 1960s, using them to comment on Western popular culture (Rowe & Stevens, 1990); the contemporary British-based art collaborative loop.pH, in turn, uses a range of textile construction methods to facilitate participatory design in which urban life can be reimagined. Similarly, Marcel Duchamp and László Moholy-Nagy were recognized in contemporary art canons for their early interactive and kinetic-based work (Rush, 2005); Natalie’s design team, by contrast, uses interactive design to facilitate creative possibilities with dance and music. In these cases, the agency of the makers, and the artwork’s potency as an expressive medium, is not dependent on an art gallery for its authority. Institutional affiliation is still key, but the coveted gallery representation, so important to modernist making, has given way to other channels of representation.
Lastly, the primarily gendered communities in which craft practice is undertaken are being reasserted with new clout. The textile guilds common throughout North American history have previously been relegated to a domestic, private, obsessive, and female domain (Parker, 1989). The participants’ affiliation with such communities has facilitated design decisions, idea sharing, exhibition opportunities, as well as the execution of work. These communities are not invisibly communicating with each other, but providing an essential infrastructure for asserting their agency as cultural producers.

If a postindustrial context has changed the way emerging makers both see and situate themselves, some revealing trends are disclosed amongst the research participants as we look at their present-day practice. These include the perils and extent of economic insecurity that affect the ability to consider material practice as a viable livelihood; an accepted advantage conferred to universities over other post-secondary institutions; a shared desire for personally meaningful work; and the overt need to distinguish their practice from that which is mass marketed. As with language around making, we see exclusive domains of media-specific categories eroding, and the autonomous practitioners within them making room for collaborative models. Communities of affiliation are key, providing both critical dialogue and practical support. Many of these present-day realities are important to bear in mind as we turn to making in an institutional context.
Chapter six: The making of makers

Creating thematic categories for participants’ experience of making in an institutional context was a challenging undertaking. Data for this chapter was abundant, and demanded that I be particularly discriminating in my selection. Reflections on participants’ formal learning permeated our conversations as it was centrally situated—positioned between early inroads and professional practice—as well as a physical terrain that we had in common. Data was derived through direct questions I posed pertaining to a participant’s undergraduate experience. However, just as commonly, the subject of school filtered into our conversations when discussing other experiences.

I addressed tensions around discipline-specific practice amidst a move towards postdisciplinary in the first section, discipline nonspecific. The second section, making under pressure, speaks to the effects of a heavy course load upon participants, and its impact upon their attitudes and experiences of making. The last section, lessons learned: constructing an identity, addresses key trajectories of experience related to each participant’s role as maker during their undergraduate studies. All sections are designed to hold a mirror to the experience of making in an institutional context and provide insight upon which new ideas can be posited.

discipline nonspecific

Sensitivity to a medium as a medium is the very heart of all artistic creation and esthetic perception.

John Dewey, 1934

The material can help convey or convince the viewer about the concept.
The discussion of disciplinarity referred to in this section draws on the meaning of the word as it relates to the field of craft. In this context, disciplines refer to historically distinct fields of practice, each dependent on specific skill sets, materials, and training. By extension, a move towards the de-disciplinary or postdisciplinary refers to a perception of such categorizations as redundant, and a desire to travel freely amongst craft disciplines without a desire for mastery.

The notion of disciplinarity is inherent in the very institutional label of Fibre, and infiltrates the teaching of skills at every level. The guiding pedagogical approach within the studio is one that emphasizes material exploration through hands-on investigation alongside a strong repertoire of technical skills. From first-year onward, students are taught a range of skills pertaining to textile construction and surface design techniques. Concurrently, they acquire a conceptual language of making as they formulate the ideas that are embedded in their work. Outside the studio, mandatory courses in visual culture and design thinking promote an ability to critically reflect on their work within a broader social and historical context. The combined discipline-specific and theoretical streams constitute the current curriculum within the department of Material Art and Design, and also describe the program of study the participants underwent.

A move towards postdisciplinarity within the visual arts generally, and craft specifically, is not unproblematic in a field that has been characterized by discipline-based training. Architect and academic, Eric Nay, describes disciplinary definitions for craft as “our worst
enemy,” and is not alone in advocating a reconsideration of this archetype (as cited in Anisef, 2010, p. 5). This paradigm shift pushes against the framework of studio-based medium specific making. How do we promote a thoughtful and rigorous approach to making and materials—the craft of a technique—if not through the lens of a medium? Is there a space for studio activity to co-exist with postdisciplinary thought, without sacrificing diligence and depth?

The participants conveyed an awareness of the tension between the two camps, with some pushing back against the disciplinary-based curriculum, which required they work with particular methods and materials. Zoey stated:

Second-year was like, do I want to be here? Do I want to do this? It was a very confusing time for me. I didn’t know what I wanted to do anymore [...] I thought that the stuff they’re making me do was like, so primitive, like why am I picking out poop out of this sheep while carding this wool? Why am I washing the piss out of this wool? I just didn’t understand. I’m like “Why am I doing this?”

Tanya was interested in a discipline-based program, but expressed a desire for more flexibility in the curriculum to incorporate skills from a range of them. She stated:

I remember feeling quite frustrated at the beginning in the Fibre Studio, because when I chose to be in fibre, I was given the impression, or maybe I wasn’t, maybe I just perceived it because I wanted it to be this way, that Material Art and Design was a program where I would get to work with materials. I mean, I just finished saying that I
wanted to focus, but I didn’t want to focus that much. [...] I wanted to work with all sorts of materials and I felt that I couldn’t.

Growing up with parents who worked in textiles and wood, Tanya stated:

I always considered them overlapping. They were both fibrous things [...] I just really wanted to be working in both, but the program doesn’t allow it because any of the wood classes are taught during times when you have to take certain mandatory classes in Fibre, so it wasn’t even an option for me.

In fact, concerns around an exclusively discipline-based practice that concentrated on the skills and materials of fibre to the exclusion of all else were pushed to the fore when participants were asked about advice that they would give to a current student. Alison stated:

I would give the advice to spend a lot of time in the studio, but spend a lot of time outside of the studio in other studios. I think maybe this is me looking at some of my regrets, but use the laser cutter, go to the foundry, try to get into the throwing club, just getting out there, if you can, and trying to bring those things into your practice. That would be my advice.

Natalie’s advice to current students was similar:
I would advise them to take electives outside their comfort zone. Speaking from experience, it can broaden their school experience and take their professional practices in new and exciting directions.

The fact that Zoey defined herself outside of the Fibre studio through her interest in contemporary and conceptual art, allowed her to find meaning in the disciplinary skills that, “had been scaring [her] away”. She stated, “that’s sort of where I started to position myself.” Regarding the appropriation of textile techniques to create conceptual artwork, Zoey stated, “once I realized my standpoint, I just started to do what I believed in and what I was attracted to.”

If disciplinary definitions are our “worst enemy,” how then does one acquire the necessary technical proficiency to be fluent in a medium? Danish art journalist Liesbeth den besten (2008) states that the archaic and romantic ideals of craft, neatly pigeonholed into specific disciplinary categories have created an impression of the term that, “is so strong that it seems fossilized today” (p. 18). This anachronistic and “frozen crafts construct” has seen an evolution within some institutions as they have embraced a broader conception of making, irrespective of techniques and processes in a move towards postdisciplinarity.

This conception moves the idea for the work to a primary position, and relies on skills, either borrowed or learned, to execute it. However, as curator Nicholas Bell cautions, “making things, it turns out, is still quite difficult” (as quoted in Janis, 2013, para. 8). How does one acquire the requisite skills within a demanding curriculum to begin to understand what they might offer? From whom do we “borrow” skills if a command of them is collectively compromised?
While the execution of Natalie’s wearable art dancewear could not occur without the requisite discipline-based skill, her description of the collaborative process also promotes an appropriately broad skill-set including that of material knowledge, sewing, and packaging design. In a follow-up email, Natalie wrote:

Building soft sensors requires me to know my materials and have the skills to work with them (craft). I also need to comfortably fit these sensors on the body (engineering & design) and make the overall package pleasing to look at (art & design). The wearable electronic circuit must be made small enough to comfortably fit the body (engineering, craft & design) and the circuit needs to be programmed (computer science). Crafting quality sound requires the skill of a musician/sound designer (art, craft & design) and software designer (computer science). [parenthesis added by participant]

Natalie’s description reflects back on overarching categories that govern the language of making, as well as the specific skills required to execute her work. Her own role was expansive enough to address part of the project’s execution, but she also understood the fields that “there was no way” she could do on her own.

Tanya was able to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach to her work once having left school. She stated:
People say, “I’m a woodworker” or “I’m a seamstress, I’m a shibori dyer.” I think, wow, I don’t know how, for me anyway, how you could just title yourself that. I can’t imagine ever feeling like I could say that about myself in a certain medium or technique. Perhaps, it would be a completely different interview twenty years from now and that’s exactly what will happen and I will zone in on something and specialize, but to me what is interesting about being a maker is all the differences, how this thing works and how that works.

On the flip side, Tanya found that working within too many different mediums was a practical deterrent. She stated:

I do currently work in several mediums, and what I may need to do is stop spreading myself out if I was to make money doing what I’m doing. I may need to pick a thing, instead of making five or six different products [...]. With the dolls, it’s wood and industrial felt. I use leather, cotton sheeting [...]. Perhaps I should just sort of pick one medium and then try to get different ideas through that.

While not wanting to adopt a specific discipline beyond being a “maker”, Tanya points out the practical deterrents of working with a range of skills and materials. Such diversification may, in fact, have unintended economic consequences. The small-scale production line that she and many of her peers produce becomes fractured, and may be less viable to manufacture as a result. Her words are reflected by Adamson (2012) who affirms the positive reasons to move laterally across craft disciplines, but recognizes the challenges of doing so as a “key problematic of the postdisciplinary era.”
making under pressure

It is through the hands that we begin to see.

Emma Neuberg, 2010

I kind of let myself make mistakes, and just not fix them, and not think about how I could fix them because I had so much work to do.

Alison

The workload within the studio programs of Material Art and Design is commonly considered to be a demanding one. Part of this can be attributed to the school’s original status as a college during which more time was allotted to studio-based instruction. Despite the mandatory courses now required in design theory and Liberal Studies that have encroached upon studio time, as well as semester reduction from thirteen weeks to twelve, course offerings and program expectations remain largely unchanged. Students bear the brunt, and the testimonials from many of the graduates make reference to the workload.

Zoey acknowledged the work-intensive curriculum by advising current students to “be prepared to do a lot of work, a lot of hands-on work. Be prepared for sleepless nights.” She referred to two key stages in developing a project within the Fibre Studio: devising a sound concept and executing it. The importance of allotting the appropriate time for both was a skill to be honed, in her estimation. Zoey recalled getting “so wrapped up in the research portion that I [...] I don’t leave enough time for the making portion.” She stated:
So I guess my advice would be to really find a way to balance yourself, balance your practice. It’s so hard for somebody to just get it and do it. It’s something that obviously comes with time. So I guess my next advice would be to be patient. I think a lot of people lose patience. I think that’s what drives them to crying and mental crazy states. It’s about balancing and being patient. I think that’s my biggest advice.

Natalie similarly referred to the need to balance time. She observed that, “sometimes I’m still on that school schedule of trying to get work done” which may involve “stay[ing] up until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning finishing something.” In describing her family life, Natalie stated, “It’s much better than it was in school. It’s much better. My husband doesn’t complain nearly as much as he used to (laughter). Yeah, I think I’m still struggling with that though, to say when I’m not going to work.”

Lidia emphasized the importance of honing a disciplined work ethic. She stated:

I would say work constantly, not in a crazy way, but just make something every day, do something every day. Keep pushing, even if it’s ugly. Keep a sketchbook and put it in your sketchbook. It will evolve that way. There’s no other way to do it. You can’t just sit there. I mean you could just sit there and something will come to you and you can make it that’s beautiful and wonderful, but I think you have to do something every day for it go somewhere.
The rigorous work demands of school challenged participants to adopt regulated work schedules and coping strategies. They also resulted in leaving learners behind if techniques were not quickly grasped. Alison stated:

I felt very overwhelmed with the amount of techniques that I was learning. I wanted to sort of focus on one and just really absorb it, but I didn’t have time for that. So I think my mind would get wrapped up in that, and it would block me from being able to fully absorb something else. So once I realized that I was a bit of a slower learner, I kind of let myself make mistakes, and just not fix them, and not think about how I could fix them, because I had so much work to do. So I’m pretty sure I made tons of mistakes, but I would just hand them in, and I wouldn’t go back and fix them. I just sort of went ahead.

Alison’s strategy for coping with an “overwhelming” workload was to sacrifice technical execution, despite the fact that this was commonly a key evaluation criterion. The decision to do so was at odds with her work ethic of making textiles that were “quality driven.” However, faced with the difficult decision of what to sacrifice in order for work to be completed and submitted, technical precision was no longer an overriding priority. Alison stated, “I didn’t see my mistakes as mistakes. I saw them as sample work, and pushing through, and keeping everything.”

At the other extreme, Natalie emphasized the importance of investing time and effort in the work. She stated:
Teachers say this all the time, but spend a lot of time working on the work. You know, don’t rush through it. Cause it just seems like there are a lot of people who don’t. I mean, if they just spent a little more time, their work would be so much better. And I know that sounds really lame, but I think you just get more out of it the more time you put into it.

The participant reflections on the program workload point to an important consideration within the departmental learning outcomes. While many stages in design development and fabrication are included in these outcomes, coping with a fast-paced and demanding workload is not one of them. On one hand, participants expressed that they were able to hone a disciplined work ethic; on the other, “sleepless nights” accompanied shortcuts and curricular objectives were sacrificed as a result. When examined in relation to the defining attribute of skill, some participants fared better than others. At its best, a demanding curriculum inspired a rigorous approach to skill acquisition; at its worst, the lack of time to reflect and hone skills was a significant obstacle to learning.

**Lessons learned: constructing an identity**

*At this point in time, I think craft lacks a credible narrative to justify its continuing place in higher education.*

Bruce Metcalf, 2007, p. 12

*I needed that discipline to feel like I knew me. I knew what I wanted to do. I knew this was the work that I wanted to do.*

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21 There are seven learning outcomes in the Material Art and Design curriculum: Historical and Contextual Knowledge; Creative Process: Concept Development, Creative Thinking, and Design Process; Critical Analysis; Independent Research; Materials, Methods, and Technologies; Communication; and Professional Practice.
Participants described a perspectival shift in their roles as makers from the time they entered postsecondary studies until graduating. These changes included modifying priorities, honing a professional work ethic, merging current interests with existing ones, abandoning preconceived notions, and supporting a practice of experimentation and risk. Both personal and professional in nature, these evolving attitudes both reflected and contributed to participant maturation within their field.

Tanya entered the Fibre Studio having “lost” a bit of herself. When asked if she had reclaimed that part of her identity, she responded with an emphatic, “Absolutely.” Armed with renewed self-assurance, Tanya described the philosophical intent of her work:

I guess I just always want to understand as much as I can the differences in people, in techniques. It’s almost like a challenge for me, like a life’s work to make sure I always try to remember to understand as much as I possibly can [...] I want to understand why people do all the things that they do, whether I agree with them or not.

I remarked that while Tanya had previously described her intentions with school as that of “learn[ing] something about myself that I didn’t quite know,” as a recent graduate, she shifted her focus to better knowing the world around her. Her desire to work in a cross-disciplinary way required additional time and effort, but I understood it to be a metaphor for understanding differences in others. Tanya stated:
I feel like that philosophy of how I feel about the world and society and people also is very much the same [as] how I want to work with different materials and techniques. [...] The complexities behind a thing almost make you want to specialize because, man just to really understand one thing could take a lifetime, but I feel for me it’s also important just to keep a limb in as much as possible so I stay connected to recognizing that everybody’s got a story.

Alison described the ability to tolerate—even value— the mistakes in her work as a position she adopted in school, and “probably through my entire career as a working maker, it will always stay with me.” Coming to her studies with the desire to learn the origins of making textiles, Alison acquired an understanding of her own learning and adopted an ideology of making that she described as being profoundly influential for her.

I noticed that the trajectory for Alison moved from a specific interest in the origins of textiles to an expansive interest in making. As a recent graduate, she stated, “I mean obviously I have personal preferences, but I won’t let those preferences stop me from experimenting with something.” Her earlier description of being “dead set in taking textiles at CAU” had shifted to a broader view in which “the medium isn’t necessarily the most important thing.” In the current chapter of her life, Alison found herself challenged to continue her creative practice with financial and space constraints. Desiring to continue working experimentally, she described building a tapestry loom out of cast aside wooden trellises, then taking a walk with her dog along the Vancouver seawall:
I was walking along and saw this massive bin of destroyed fishing nets, so I took a bunch of them. They’re beautiful. They’re barnacle-covered, black, faded, ripped apart, and I just thought I’m going to weave with these. So that was a project that I thought was inspired from my space confinement [...] I think it would be so amazing to go to a studio every day to create, but it’s also great to be pushed in weird ways that you never would be pushed maybe if you had a studio. I don’t know if I would think to bring home old fishing nets and start weaving with it if I had a studio.

Lidia’s undergraduate experience at CAU followed three years in a similar program. Already familiar with many of the studio techniques, she described her initial intention as “just to get my degree and to have some studio space to work.” Over time, Lidia expressed realizing that returning to school allowed her to “harness [her] technique,” “take risks,” and “try everything.” She noted that combining courses in design thinking also allowed her to examine her practice in a critical light. Asking the questions “Why am I making anything? Why am I here in this school?” allowed her to reflect on her work in the context of present-day material culture. She described the program of studies that encompassed studio work, design theory, and liberal studies as allowing her to think beyond her physical practice. She stated:

the academic aspect of it helped me out a lot. I wasn’t really comfortable with writing papers or researching. You kind of just went and did them. Or I did them. Just get them over with and by my fourth year I really enjoyed it, and I understood it and I was confident in my writing skills and researching, and I think that kind of helped me with my physical practice.
Lidia also acknowledged the link between the rigour of school expectations and her current professional practice. She stated:

I’m starting to see the connection from being in school to being here now, and starting to do things like keeping a sketchbook, which was the hardest thing in the beginning of going to school, [as it was] for a lot of people. [It] has become a necessary thing for me to do in order to understand my work and to see it kind of come together.

I felt that Lidia’s experience was an interesting counterpoint to Alison’s. While Alison expressed not having adequate reflection time to fully absorb the material that was being introduced, Lidia was initially discouraged by the seven-year duration of her two undergraduate textile programs. In hindsight, this period spent in school allowed Lidia to hone her technique as well as question and contextualize it, affording her the ability to think about and through her practice.

Natalie began her studies at CAU wanting “to learn about pattern design, and more about surface design, print in particular.” She wasn’t sure what stream she would pursue (“am I a designer or an artist?”), but saw her education as a chance to “know more” about a field she had entered. I was aware that the disciplinary concerns she expressed in her early intentions changed when describing her current work with wearable technology. Natalie addressed the terms of art, craft, and design in this work by saying, “I struggle with the three categories because I see them as one. I suppose I lean toward the idea that there are elements of art, craft and design in any object whether it has been hand crafted or manufactured.”
As a former belly dancer, Natalie expressed feeling that her wearable technology work was relevant to her trajectory of experience. As a dancer, she had been taught to make her own belly dance costume. Her work with wearable technology allowed her to give this costume an important interactive dimension, a prospect that she expressed being fascinating to her. It also allowed her to work closely with the dancers and choreographers to respond to their needs. Natalie stated:

It’s all related to my past [...]. [It] came from my own experience as a dancer. When I took [a wearable technology] class, and I discovered I could make sound using sensors on the body, I immediately thought of dance, “Oh, wouldn’t it be great if a dancer could make her own sounds.” So that’s where all of this comes from. I had a couple of iterations from back then, two years ago, and it’s all been progressively leading up to this, which is kind of neat.

At the outset, Zoey desired to come to CAU, thinking it would be “a very great foundation for me to understand what kinds of fibres work best together, how things are dyed.” A discouraging second-year in the program sent her back to Vancouver, “drained from being in such a fast evolving city and having a full course load and working two jobs.” After questioning whether this was a program she really wanted to pursue, when she returned, Zoey stated, “My attitude towards my art practice did change drastically.” Having struggled with the mandatory courses in textile techniques, Zoey described her third year when “I really picked things back up and I became a lot more focused.” The contemporary art that had so intrigued her prior to CAU became actively integrated into her practice,
and peers became “visibly responsive” to her new direction. Zoey stated, “my practice [was] featured in the [newspaper]. There was a huge one-page dedication to CAU students doing wearable technology. My picture was taking one-third of the article.”

Zoey stated:

lately I’ve been gearing a lot of my work towards this topic of identity [...]. I really do consider my artwork and design work as a vehicle for my voice or my opinion or my thoughts, and I want that to be visually out there so another being could be out there and catch that and understand it. It’s a lot of communication.

Zoey wrestled with the possibilities of continuing her studies in fashion design. However, I felt that, despite her commitment to post-secondary studies, neither the degree nor perhaps its resulting income were as important as garnering a professional artistic identity. Honing in on a guiding interest in conceptual art while in her third year allowed her to confidently position herself within this realm, emphasizing that which she described as “innovative,” “experimental,” and “interactive.” She stated, “I can’t really steer away from being conceptual. I really like to add that extra kick.” The public recognition of her thesis collection visibly buoyed Zoey’s enthusiasm as did critical acclaim within the both the classroom and the media.

Within participants’ distinct trajectories of experience we see patterns emerging that shed light on both skill and agency. If honing a specific skill set is positioned on one end of a continuum, and an expansive array of techniques is at the other, we see participants
travelling between the two points as a result of their undergraduate studies. Alison and
Natalie moved from a specific set of interests prior to school to a more expansive
sensibility as a result of it, whereas Lidia moved from a broad identification as maker to a
more specialized one as textile designer and artist. Tanya’s consistently vast interest in a
range of materials and techniques characterized both periods, although she acknowledged
the practical drawbacks to this way of working; and Zoey’s less certain initial intent was
countered by an assured conviction that a considerable repertoire of techniques could be
chosen to illustrate a concept.

The range of disciplinary tendencies with which participants identified pushes at the
boundaries of current curriculum constraints. The Fibre program is designed for students
to hone an array of textile related skills. Acquiring a broader base of knowledge, while
attractive to participants, was a less attainable option due to curricular demands.
Participants’ perspectives illuminate the need to clarify how skill acquisition is defined,
and to adopt an institutional stance that supports a diversity of end uses.

If participant agency is defined as an expressive facility within material practice that
reflects who they are and who they want to be (Charny, 2011), their perspectives reflect
that this intent is not being uniformly realized within their undergraduate training. Some
were prevented from learning skills they wished to, limited by requisite instruction that at
times felt “dated” and irrelevant. Most acknowledged the pressure they were under,
simultaneously motivating some while holding the potential to leave others behind, and
acting as a deterrent to realizing personal agency. Finally, a grappling with labels may
point to a need for a broader theoretical understanding that frames material practice and
the participant’s role within it. If indeed the acquisition of skills is a key program directive, it begs the question, *how should such skills be defined?* Answering the question requires that curriculum recognizes and supports distinct trajectories of experience, and relinquishes prescribed professional outcomes in order to support students in realizing their respective aims. This point will be taken up at the end of the following chapter, which summarizes the ways in which the current research may allow for a reconsideration of material arts curricula.
Chapter seven: contributions to craft theory and curriculum

The participants’ perspectives on language, work intentions, obstacles, opportunities, sensory involvement, models of professional practice, and trajectories of experience allowed me to analyze how they conceive of and experience making. This analysis, in turn, provided a means of assessing material arts curricula to determine how effectively it supported the participants’ conception and experience. As well, it allowed for a considered second look at current craft discourse that presents the term as an approach, defined by the particular attributes of embodiment, agency, resistance, and skill. While commonly interdependent, these defining and oft-sited characteristics provide a good starting point for looking at its theoretical position—one that is occasionally underscored but more commonly refuted by the analysis of emerging makers’ experience.

**craft as a way of doing things**

*Making is the most powerful way that we solve problems, express ideas and shape our world. What and how we make defines who we are, and communicates who we want to be.*

Dale Charny

The notion of craft as a methodology describes a process or mode of making that is closely linked to embodied activity. The term reflects the stance of the maker, and the quality of an experience. It locates physical properties in space and time. This inherent physicality allows craft to be mobilized as a counterpoint to industry—a familiar conception in the public imagination. It is equally attractive as a counterpoint to an absence of bodies at work, recalling the blue-collar history that primarily defined the North American
workforce. As such, its allure touches a cultural nerve, tapping into a nostalgic memory of purchasing a domestically made bicycle or blender; the charm of buying honey from a local beekeeper.

While the physical process of making is described as a desirable one by the participants, this is not unanimously so. Nor can the notion of fulfilment through the embodied act of making be considered an overriding priority. Participants identified wanting to give an audience choice, to communicate the process of making their work, to select and inform the viewer of unique materials, to create a signature look, to imbue their work with deeper meaning, or provide an interactive experience. While attractive, the embodied act of making was not a defining intent. Metcalf (2007) agrees, citing pleasurable labour as a familiar yet irrelevant justification for craft studios existing.

Embodyment may be more attractive from the outside looking in, tapping into a broadly appealing socio-cultural construct that both pits an individual against a sweatshop, and handwork against digital technologies. This binary mobilizes a cultural discourse that laments socio-cultural losses to industrialization (Buszek, 2011). It reasserts the act of making from the perspective of being under siege, and imposes important limits upon it. An interested public observes Tanya and Lidia at work in the cultural centre that houses their studios, however a limited segment of the population will buy their work. The appeal of labouring bodies does not supplant attractively priced foreign-made goods, but relegates such bodies to existing as an attractive sidebar. The participants, in turn, speak more emphatically about the economic barriers to producing and marketing their work than they do about the embodied experience of making it.
The notion of resistance permeates this discourse of craft. Being defined against stronger forces since its inception as a term, allows craft to assume a potent, albeit familiar, place at the sidelines, thumbing its nose at the mainstream. Micro-businesses may be less derisive than DIY in this regard, but challenge the homogeneous megacorporation through non-economic incentives—promising that which is local and distinctive. The nature of the work being marketed by participants also reflected this attribute. Product lines were designed to offer options, to question the lifecycle of a garment, to transcend the limited choices currently available, to position themselves within the cracks of a neoliberal system that theoretically carves out a place for all in the global marketplace, but, in fact, only does so for multinational corporations -- Coca Cola duking it out with Pepsi (David Harvey, 2005). Local producers seek niche markets, and focus on the work’s distinction within this market, its coveted aura that will set it apart. As such, the notion of resistance was less political than pragmatic in nature. While alluring to think otherwise, I allege that resistance was not a determinant but a consequence. Tanya’s interest in rethinking the design of children’s clothes, or Lidia’s desire to inform the viewer of the skill and labour invested in her work became a necessary means of differentiation; an unavoidable byproduct of choosing to be a maker within a neoliberal system that champions the powerful in its free market agenda.

The conception of craft as embodied and resistant fixes it within a discourse of otherness that determines how it will be assessed, marketed, and critically received. As long as the disparity exists between global labour forces, the work of local makers will never occupy the mainstream, but will be relegated to that of a non-threatening counterpoint to
consumer culture. If resistance can be claimed by this group, it is that of resisting broad-based market access, and economic viability in their field.

A case could be made for craft having resisted the stranglehold of modernism. The participants did not seek the validation through the gallery system that defined studio craft. While all sought an audience, the channels for doing so were largely separate from those of art institutions, turning to an infrastructure of studio sales, craft shows, and custom work, as well as producing and marketing work within collaborative networks. However, resisting modernist strictures cannot be considered a productive step forward if readily adopting an equally supplementary and restrictive cultural conception of maker. Claiming the status of *other* in an inequitable global marketplace places significant restrictions on the socio-economic viability and relevance of these makers. Alison seeks to repurpose that which is industrially fabricated and Lidia seeks to distinguish her textiles from those which are mass marketed as there is no option for them to do otherwise.

While the attributes of embodiment and resistance are commonly created within the public imagination, the notion of agency can be analyzed more broadly, as it is reflected in the attitudes of the makers themselves. If agency denotes who we are and who we want to be (Brown, 1997; Rowley, 1997), all participants communicated an appreciation of this meaning. They self-identified as makers at a young age, and felt it offered a promising means through which they could expressively communicate when arriving at post-secondary studies. With varying emphasis, all articulated a conception of their role as maker that was connected to self-realization. Their work with material practice provided
the means of both understanding and asserting a sense of self. It also enabled them to develop a voice with which they chose to speak through their materials.

While this interpretation of creative practice has been longstanding and broadly applicable to a range of artistic fields (Dewey, 1934; Frith, 1996), there may be merit to Stevens’ (2011) assertion that material practice becomes more attractive the further we are from the experience, making it more valued through its absence. However, in light of critical systemic obstacles, it is important to ask whether this notion of agency is one that is divorced from earning a livelihood, becoming that of a pleasant hobby or an occasional diversion. While an intermittent pursuit could inevitably affect a transmission of agency through material practice, the economic deterrents it presents may be equally counter-productive in this regard. Tanya discovered an identity through her product line, yet this self-assuredness gave way to vulnerability when confronting present-day economic obstacles. Lidia was exhausted by, but dependent upon, her restaurant job. Natalie’s future in wearable technology hinged on a need to secure external funding. When viewed through this lens, agency joins forces with embodiment and resistance as attractive attributes for the audience but elusive to the maker who is bound by more pressing and intractable concerns.

The final pillar of the theoretical framework addressed through the analysis of participant narratives was that of skill. Commonly fetishized historically, skill represented the essential balance between considered thought and manual expertise. Its description separated it from industry, where the worker was subordinate (“In handicrafts...the workman makes use of a tool,” Marx stated, whereas “in the factory, the machine makes
Emerging views on making

use of him” (1887, p. 69.), and described the backbone of craft as a pre-Industrial artisan enterprise. Skill was consistently relegated to that of manual proficiency; the practiced mastery of a medium.

Analysis of participant attitudes towards skill is closely linked with, and pitted against, their educational experience. Far from being discipline-specific, skill encompassed all aspects of professional practice, including time management, promotion, display, collaborating with others, creatively addressing space constraints, writing grant applications, vying for internship positions, and honing a technical expertise in their chosen medium. While skill continues to be central to the participants’ experience of making, the word does not describe a specific set of skills pertaining to executing work, but an expansive and multi-faceted range of abilities designed to bring their work to an audience. It is reflected in researcher Harvey Braverman’s assertion that craft skill is based on the use of tools and materials, but also the context and conditions in which the work is being done (1974), or the “skilful achievement of relevance” (Alison Briton as cited in Press & Cusworth, 1998, p. 16). This point is particularly salient in the following section when examining skill within material arts curricula. Before turning attention in this direction, a quick summary is in order:

Resistance and embodiment carried limited meaning for these makers, although shrouded them in an illusory charm that fuels an enduring cultural conception of their roles while ignoring insurmountable economic obstacles. Craft can underscore agency within a social context that is distanced from handwork, but if the agency is held up to market forces, it is sacrificed. Skill continues to be central, although not relegated to mastery of a medium. In
fact, the expansive skill set that is required draws upon participants’ technical expertise as it does the skills of a knowledge economy. While Bruce Metcalf (1999) asserts that craft is still an opposing force just as it was a century ago, standing against mass-production, capitalism, even ugliness, researcher Kathryn Lichit-Harriman (2004) notes that “it is within those oppositions that people are working – both to sustain and to destroy them” (para. 5).

Participants expressed a conception of making that emphasized a desire to communicate and reach an audience. They wanted to make a meaningful contribution to material culture, and provide thoughtfully considered options for a potential buyer. They hoped to use their chosen medium to provoke the viewer, to foster an understanding of the other through an expansive understanding of skills, to rethink product lifecycles, to communicate joy, and to garner critical support and enthusiasm. Finally, they wanted these priorities to be overriding, and not eclipsed by the debilitating financial insecurity that made studio rental an impossibility, and dependence on other employment a necessity.

Notably, if participants rebuffed much of the theoretical framework of craft in their present-day conception of making, they also rebuffed the language. Finding the term flawed or incomplete, most used a range of other descriptors for their work. While a number of forces may be at play in this vocabulary choice—institutional avoidance being one, a lack of theoretical course offerings being another—it does draw attention to craft’s role as “newly intriguing” (Fariello, 2011, p. 23). The field may be enticing to artists and theorists who have observed its shifting cultural context; it may also be equally intriguing
to a broader pool of visual artists who appropriate its visual vocabulary, or the audience at
the cultural centre who gaze at the curious phenomenon of makers at work. It is not,
however, a term that is relevant to the emerging makers in this study.

**a second look at curriculum**

It is important to acknowledge a key limitation to this study when looking at
recommendations for material arts curricula. In its investigation of five Fibre program
graduates, all participants were either practicing a vocation as makers, to the degree that
they were remunerated for it, or in the preparatory stages of doing so. This figure is
disproportionate to longer term trends in which graduates choose a range of professional
work. While Canadian statistics are not available, the majority of craft program graduates
in England turn to livelihoods other than making. Here, it is a field in which the majority
of full-time makers have never been enrolled in a craft program, and degree-holding
graduates are scantly represented (Press & Cusworth, 1998).

Understanding that many fibre graduates will not adopt a professional practice as a
maker, this section necessarily needs to acknowledge this possibility. It does not delimit
education by conceiving of it as a prescribed path to making—a view that serves to
reinscribe a disregard for manual skills as being suited for other than that of a vocation—
but considers craft to be a mode of knowledge with theoretical, creative, technical, and
analytical implications.

The following five key points outline recommendations for material arts curricula:
Material arts curricula need to recognize craft as a mode of knowledge production.

This recommendation lies at the heart of all curricular proposals that follow. As a form of knowledge production, material practice enabled participants to think about and through their medium. Participants expressed that the embodied act of making was the cognitive foundation of their learning. The handling, manipulating, revising—as Lidia stated, the “playing and playing”—allowed them to arrive at new understandings. These understandings transcended that of object-making, and included self-realization and self-expression through their chosen medium.

Such understandings are at the core of material practice, but do not operate in isolation. An awareness of craft antecedents, cultural discourses—both present and past—that frame craft, the language and legacy of earlier makers, and the present-day conditions of making, create a foundational understanding that supports this conception of knowledge making. Whether the nomenclature of craft is declared to be redundant may be a sentimental loss—certainly to those who insist on it being on everyone’s mind—but less worrying than an ignorance of a legacy and the economic and cultural discourses that govern making. The “grappling” with language to which former Shuebrook (2002) refers, is reflected in a discomfort with terminology that most participants expressed (p. 71).

Knowing the history, contemporary culture, economic determinants, and cultural paradigms, allows for it to be understood as a field with particular defining discourses, rather than an anomalous and supplementary subset within the field of design. If the language of making evolves as a result, it may exemplify practitioners finding their own truths (Stevens, 2011), rather than discarding one that is laden with cultural misconceptions.
Emerging views on making

Curriculum and course expectations should support the premise of craft as knowledge production.

An undergraduate workload that most participants reflected upon as being demanding, was designed to impart rigorous training of the requisite technical instruction within the field of fibre. While course expectations in Material Art & Design were tacitly assumed to be arduous, this approach has commonly been defended by administration as the path to mastering the foundational knowledge of a chosen medium. However, participant responses indicate that in the quest to impart mastery, some flourish while others suffer. Adopting such a system enforces a fixed modernist conception of artist as genius, an ideology by which those that can handle the pressure and produce superior work rise above the others who do not receive the same acclaim. The notion of training the talented few perpetuates a stratification of students based on their allegedly inborn abilities (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008), serving the authority of the cultural institution at the expense of equal access for students to produce knowledge through their medium.

If the goal of curriculum is that of promoting craft as a mode of knowledge production, and experiential learning is at the core of this knowledge, reflective practice may have an important role to play. Providing the curricular space to create and reflect allows for an experiential continuum that holds the key to considered making (Dewey, 1934; Press, 1995; Pye, 1978; Schön, 1991; Toner-Edgar, 2004). Scholar Maggi Toner-Edgar (2004) describes this reflection as promoting an openness to learning with each new challenge, perfecting past approaches and reframing previous concepts. What Mike Press (1995) described as intelligent making, can only occur with room for reflection that allows for full
understanding of otherwise tacit knowledge. Within such a learning context, Alison’s alleged mistakes are reframed as valuable reflective moments, supported by curricular aims rather than contravening them.

Relinquish a prescriptive view of skill.
Curricular intentions that define craft by the mastery of skills related to a particular medium must be reassessed. Vestiges of medieval workshops and the “long shadow of William Morris” perpetuate a conception of material practice that is both limiting and isolating (Cooke, 2003, p. 28). Participants’ advice to others to get out of the studio, and their expressions of lingering regret that curricular options that were unavailable to them, point to the need for systemic change. However, such change cannot embrace an ideology at the opposite extreme, but must embed flexibility into the curriculum to allow for many permutations of knowledge production.

Trajectories of experience were varied and distinct, reflecting a range of interests in arriving at post-secondary studies and a professional practice beyond. Lidia moved from a broad identification as maker to honing specialized skills as a textile designer and artist, while Tanya consistently expressed an interest in integrating her fibre knowledge with other materials-based skills that she was prevented from taking. The logic that promotes specialization while preventing breadth is outmoded. However, branding discipline-based understandings an enemy is equally erroneous. Both trajectories, and a multiplicity of those beyond and in between, have validity in material practice. Curriculum needs to relinquish an obsolete approach to craft skill and open the door to students adopting a range of approaches.
Relinquish a prescriptive view of professional practice.

An expansive definition of skill must accompany equally expansive possibilities for professional practice. If craft is asserted as a mode of knowledge production, freed from the specificities of a vocational intent, it recognizes and supports directions that are currently being taken by program graduates. Allowing this philosophy to infiltrate course expectations can create a space for increased cross-disciplinary approaches and possibilities for collaboration. Natalie’s undergraduate work led to her current work as project manager of a team of interdependent workers, one that could have been honed through for the option of collaborative coursework. Zoey’s desire to position herself within the realm of conceptual art could have been promoted through program flexibility that allows for a range of outcomes. With all participants, an understanding of craft’s economic status as a sidebar—perhaps even options for confronting and challenging this conception—are important curricular considerations. The distinct trajectories within the field of making, and a wealth of those beyond, necessitate such systemic recognition. In addition to embedding flexibility in program requirements, allowing for personalized responses to course deliverables would recognize and support a variety of professional outcomes.

Recognize that craft is not a cause that needs defending.

While seemingly opposed to all previous points, this final recommendation is, in fact, an ideological perspective that underpins them. The analysis of participant narratives calls for a recommendation to broaden and assert craft as a mode of knowledge production; it also promotes an expansive view of skill and professional practice. Importantly, these
measures are not being recommended to “save” craft, but to endorse a pedagogical stance that responds to the community of learners. In fact, its unspoken institutional and cultural vulnerability may explain the impetus behind a taxing workload and institutional insistence upon a currently prescriptive curriculum.

If curriculum makes room for both a historical and present-day understanding of craft, an awareness of cultural discourses that frame the term, and space for reflective practice to occur, it paves the way for students to think about and through their medium. This knowledge production will allow craft to confront its own discursive boundaries and release it from its historically determined place (Friday, n.d.). Craft’s status as contingent and other than have been fuelled by a range of fixed attributes that resist such reassessment, only serving to compromise its discursive centre (Mazanti, 2005). Exposing and confronting the constructs that have frozen a conception of craft, and positioned it in a particular way in relation to other economic and cultural practices may allow for a reclamation of this term. Ultimately, this is for future graduates to determine, and curriculum to facilitate.
**APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT – EMAIL NOTICE**

January, 2013

Dear _______:  

I am conducting a study on contemporary textiles practice from the perspective of recent graduates from the Canadian Art University (CAU) Fibre Studio. I am hoping you may be interested in participating. As a participant, your involvement would include the following:

1. participating in one, hour-long interview involving a description/reflection of your creative practice.  

   *Timeline: February 1 – February 22, 2013*

2. participating in one, hour-long session reviewing a limited number of works (2-3) in your creative practice.  

   *Timeline: February 23 – March 13, 2013*

You will be sent a copy of the interview and creative practice transcripts, (April, 2013) at which point you may choose to add additional comments.

There are no measurable risks to the study. Rather, its intention is to foster dialogue and critical reflection on textiles practice within an educational and cultural context. You may choose to remain anonymous in the study, if you wish.

You will be paid $50 once the interview and creative practice transcripts have been approved (April, 2013) to acknowledge your involvement in the project. Please note that if you wish to withdraw from the research at any time up until this date, you are free to do so with no detrimental effects. If you choose, your data may be withdrawn at this time as well. All data for the research will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office and kept for a three-year period.

Please let me know if you would be interested in participating. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at kathleen.morris@utoronto.ca.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Morris, Researcher  
OIIE – Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

On Labour, Legacy, and Emerging Voices: 
Fibre Graduates Reflect on Their Practice

February, 2013

Dear Participant:

Thank you for participating in the study I am conducting. This letter provides information about the research and outlines the responsibilities of participants.

This study examines contemporary textiles practice from the perspective of recent graduates from the Canadian Art University (CAU) department of Material Art & Design (MAAD). I will be working with six recent graduates from the MAAD Fibre Studio to undertake a narrative inquiry into the experience of emerging makers. Participant involvement will require the following:

1. **one, hour-long interview** involving a description/reflection of your creative practice.
   

2. **one, hour-long session** reviewing a limited number of works (2-3) in your creative practice.

   *Timeline: February 23 – March 13, 2013.*

You will be sent a copy of the interview and creative practice transcripts, (April, 2013) at which point you may choose to add additional comments.

The research has been reviewed and received approval through the Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto. There are no measurable risks to the study. Rather, its intention is to foster dialogue and critical reflection on textiles practice within an educational and cultural context. Participation is voluntary, and you will suffer no adverse effects by refusing to participate.

You may select whether you choose to remain anonymous in the study or not. If you choose to remain anonymous, all identifiers will be removed from written materials associated with this
research and you may choose a pseudonym. If you do not choose to remain anonymous, you will not be assigned a pseudonym, and may choose contribute images of your work to supplement your text. Please note, you are free to change your status from that of disclosure to full anonymity at any point in the research. If names and/or identifiers of others are disclosed in the interview, these identities will be kept confidential and all identifiers will be removed. All data for the research will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office and kept for a three-year period.

You will be paid $50 upon completion of the data collection (two interviews) and transcript review (April 2013) to acknowledge your involvement in the project. If you choose to withdraw from the research before data collection and transcript review are complete (April 2013), you are free to do so, but will not receive financial compensation. In the event of withdrawal, your data will be removed from the research. After April 2013, when data collection and transcript review are complete, you cannot withdraw from the research.

If in agreement with the above terms, please sign below indicating your willingness to participate in the research. If you have any questions, please contact me at kathleen.morris@utoronto.ca. Additionally, you can contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273, if you have questions about your rights as a participant.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Morris, Researcher
OIIE: Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning - University of Toronto

Signature of Participant  Date
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – INTERVIEW #1

On Labour, Legacy, and Emerging Voices: Fibre Graduates Reflect on Their Practice

Interview #1 (Semi-Structured):

Date:

Time of Interview:

Duration:

Location:

Researcher:

Participant:

Thank you for participating in this study. With your permission, I would like to record the interview so that I can refer to it later. Our discussion is confidential, and I will be the only one who has access to the recording. The process will take about one hour, but if you want to stop recording at any time, please let me know.

QUESTIONS:

Introduction: Background

• Could you tell me about your background in art or textiles practice?

Prompts:
  o What lead you to the Fibre Studio at CAU?
  o Was there a pivotal moment when you decided this was what you wanted to pursue?

Institutional Context

• What did you hope to find in the Fibre studio at CAU?

• Prompts:
  o Could you describe one of your most memorable moments in the Fibre Studio?
  o What was one of the most challenging aspects of working in the Fibre Studio?
  o What are some of your enduring memories of life as a student?
  o If you had to give a current student going into the Fibre Studio words of advice, what would they be?

Professional Practice
• How would you describe the work that you do?

**Prompts:**
- What are some of the words that you always use to describe your work?
- What would you identify as the most important aspects of your work?
- What would you like the viewer to know?
- What are some words you would use to describe your state while in the process of making a piece?
- How do you feel your current practice fits into other aspects of your life? Are there obstacles (time, money, support) to you doing your work?
- How important is the medium to your work? Do you feel your work could be executed in another medium?
- What have been the greatest hurdles to overcome? What have been the moments to celebrate?

*(Participants will have the option to add comments to the interview transcript, April, 2013)*
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – INTERVIEW #2

On Labour, Legacy, and Emerging Voices: Fibre Graduates Reflect on Their Practice

Interview #2 (Open-Ended – Review of Work):

Date:

Time of Interview:

Duration:

Location:

Researcher:

Participant:

Thank you for meeting with me today. As with our previous interview, I would like to record our discussion so that I can refer to it later. Everything you say will be kept confidential, and I will be the only one who has access to the recording. The process will take about one hour, but if you want to stop recording at any time, just let me know.

QUESTIONS:

Could you please describe the work we are looking at? (date of completion, materials, concept, process, end-use).

Reflection Prompts:

Why did you choose this work to illustrate your practice?

What was your key priority in making this work?

What enduring associations do you have with this work?

(if student work) Considering the time that has past since the work has been made, how has your interest changed in the intent of your work? Materials? Processes?

What feedback have you received on this work? How do you feel about the feedback?
References:


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Emerging views on making


Emerging views on making


