



Jolie Stahl, Stoneware, 2018

# Modern Craft and the Philanthropic Endeavor

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# THE FUTURE OF CRAFT

If craft can be defined as highly skilled handwork, then it has two forms of practice in the 21st century. The first is characteristic of intensive hand-eye performative labor at low wages in industries yet to be completely automated. The second pertains to the production and restoration of luxury goods for wealthy consumers, or merely for one's own pleasure. Certainly, the rich variety of crafts and craft production fall onto a continuum stretching between these poles, yet from the perspective of those seeking a career in craft all are constantly subjected to pressures exerted by low-wage labor and mass production. For example, the production of musical instruments by master luthiers faces numerous complications in securing adequate wages and rare organic materials compared to low labor costs and plentiful supplies in unregulated production centers.<sup>1</sup>

For another field, the extremes of crafts production are readily identifiable in contrasting the cheap woven baskets sold by big-box retailers to the incomparable mastery of Mary Jackson's sweet grass baskets. We measure the difference not only in prices but also according to the standards of design, materials, execution, and durability. The former is a cheap, throwaway commodity manufactured by workers who are themselves disposable in the calculations of global commerce, whereas the latter attains the status of artistry, an object celebrated for its embodiment of ageless values.

Despite our familiarity with these distinctions in matters of utility and taste, we often ignore the sociology of crafts and makers in the reproduction of these objects and values. This failure to appreciate the role of craft labor creates a dilemma for the philanthropist committed to the perpetuation of handwork traditions. What sense does it make to encourage careers and foster aptitudes in a precarious trade if the maker cannot sustain herself and her family in a global economy? What outcomes can the philanthropist expect in funding crafts devoted to the nearly exclusive production of bespoke goods for consumption by millionaires and billionaires? Are we betting on the promise of recognition and a more fulfilling lifestyle for those inclined to handwork? Is it perhaps an even higher stakes gamble on the future of craft as otium, creative labor freed from the tyranny of markets? Or, are we reinforcing an economy of personal dependency, a return to the antediluvian relations of antiquity and feudalism where craft requires commissions by wealthy patrons?

As the co-founder of a philanthropy committed to the exclusive mission of perpetuating crafts traditions in America, I will draw upon some recent experiences to illustrate this dilemma and hopefully engage a debate about the way forward.

# INTRODUCTION

**W**e need IYRS to teach these skills to young people. Who else will look after our beautiful boats?” declared the speaker to approximately one-hundred-fifty guests seated in the opulent Model Room of the New York Yacht Club. She and her husband were accepting an award for their sponsorship of the annual winter benefit for the International Yacht Restoration School. Located in Newport, Rhode Island, IYRS’s curriculum features a two-year course in wooden boat-building and restoration in which students learn the basics of yacht design and how to handle traditional materials with tools of the trade. Each year the school acquires a half-dozen salvage 12-foot Beetle Cat sailboats to be rehabilitated by students working in small teams under the guidance of experienced marine engineers. Design theory, applied physics, and relevant geometry are taught in the classroom before the apprentices descend into the cavernous workshop to reconstruct their boats. From keel up to the deck, from frame out to the hull they measure, cut, bend, assemble and finish wooden planks, masts, and hardware in preparation for the graduation day launch in the harbor. As the modest sailboats grab the normally brisk early June trade winds this capstone event is a splendid example of traditional craft. Now working the tillers and trimming the sails, the graduates offer living testimony to an age-old tradition redolent in sea chanties and literary tropes. They glide easily around a harbor crowded with modern yachts of varying sizes and shapes, the contrasts familiar to anyone acquainted with the resort harbors of the seven seas.

IYRS also offers courses in marine systems and composite technology for students inclined to the careers in the construction and servicing of new boats, but it was the wooden boat building and restoration component that led our foundation to solicit their proposals for annual tuition support grants. The refurbished Beetle Cats are simply beautiful, their construction apparently flawless to the uninitiated eye. The school auctions them for about \$17,000 apiece to raise funds for the next class to follow their peers into the craft. Of course, they are not the boats to which Madame One-Percent was referring in New York. She meant the gilded yachts, descendants and replicas of the models adorning yacht club’s walls, that migrate seasonally from the Caribbean up the East Coast (or elsewhere) to accommodate their owners and guests. Long the sport of millionaires, sailing is today a thriving luxury industry that provides employment for skilled, experienced hands.

A career in yachting can take an ambitious person further than one might imagine. Upon graduation in 1998 my NYU student headed to Florida where he became a licensed sea captain and wound up piloting super yachts for the rich and famous, commanding crews of a dozen or more sailors, deckhands, and cooks. His responsibilities included provisioning, mooring, repairs, and insurance, but the main job was to make sure the boat was anchored in the right place whenever

the boss or his friends wanted access. Two decades catering to the whims of spoiled brats and celebrities led him to retire at the ripe old age of 39 to enjoy homes in Miami Beach and Valencia. Although sailing is his trade, he speaks with authority about the complex bank transactions involving limited liability corporations in the commerce of luxury yachts. He once captained for Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi who welcomed foreign dignitaries and corporate sovereigns to his offshore “bunga-bunga” parties. The crew’s payroll was delivered monthly in cash by helicopter.

Not all yachts belong to vulture capitalists of course, but their every transaction determines the economics of the boat building industry from the top down. Brokers, attorneys, bankers, insurers, chandlers, moorings, and even excise-tax rules in different states ensure an absence of democracy in the way the business is organized. No matter how much skill, you will never accumulate the necessary capital to start your own workshop. You will become a craftsman-laborer and maybe build your dream boat on weekends and holidays. Always there will be more journeymen setting out on their *compagnonnage*, the step beyond apprenticeship, driving wages down inexorably to subsistence levels. Despite your unparalleled expertise, you remain a hired-hand whose fortunes will fluctuate to the syncopated rhythms of Wall Street’s midwinter bonuses. Organize a labor union and very quickly you’ll be staring at “our beautiful boats” from outside the shipyard’s chain link fence. Yet the invigorating salt air, creaking wooden joints, aroma of a freshly planed board, foghorn lullabies, and other sensations continue nonetheless to beckon special young people to a quest of self-actualization through craft.



Jolie Stahl, “Rescue at Sea,” wood, mosaic and colon figure 2016

## SEEKING CRAFT

Similar enchantments constitute the allure of other crafts, from the Promethean heat of a blacksmith's forge to the perfume of dried flax hackled into linen thread. Masonry, timber-framing, cabinetry, violin-making, basketry, weaving, bookbinding, pottery, wood turning and stone carving; each activity has its own mojo that we set out to discover and support in chartering the 501(c)(3) Ddora Foundation in 2007. With professional backgrounds in the fine arts and anthropology, we marveled at the artistry of the Gee's Bend quilters, their cooperative methods, their repurposing of worn-out clothes into heirloom textiles embodying the culture and history of African Americans. The quilters epitomized to us the meaning of modern craft in the fusion of oral tradition with technique to generate value from scraps, to create possessions of immense beauty and personal memory. Although these unique pieces were sold to collectors and featured in museum exhibitions, the bidding and commerce could not detach them from an inalienable soul conjured by their makers.

They did not need our assistance in Alabama, but if similar crafts continue to thrive in the shadows of mass commodity production we sought to identify them as worthy of support from the philanthropic community. To get the ball rolling we visited crafts schools to observe students and their instructors at work, assess their needs, and solicit proposals. Among the craft traditions we researched and funded were Appalachian crafts, Mardi Gras Indian beadwork, Rumford fireplace construction, New England cabinetry & furniture making, colonial masonry & building arts, violin making & repair, Byzantine bookbinding, wooden boat-building & restoration, and Swedish textile arts.

Not for lack of trying we encountered mostly puzzlement and incomprehension at the organizational level. Consultants advised us to seek peerage in arts philanthropies where, predictably, program directors side-stepped any discussion about whether craft belongs on their agenda. Their priorities lay almost exclusively in dance, music, and other performing arts. Moreover, to the extent that large foundations like Ford, Rockefeller, NEA, and NEH tend to aggregate money and existing philanthropic trends, much of their support embraces media technology to the detriment of handwork. The reasoning is quite transparent and readily accessible by analyzing the interests of major philanthropies in the grant deadline pages of the Chronicle of Philanthropy. Technology entrepreneurs favor digitalization of the arts and the introduction of electronics into their production and promotion. If teaching the arts happens to be an interest, then their grants are generally packaged in the form of electives within charter school curricula as opposed to helping beleaguered public district schools restore long ago cancelled arts and crafts programs. Briefly, the democratic inculcation of craft technique has itself been abandoned to

the vast market of commodified skills. A passionate instrument maker will sooner get a grant for writing code to synthesize woodwinds rather than learning how to construct an oboe.

Eager for our membership fee the Association of Small Foundations (ASF) committed to organizing a telephone conference with other foundations dedicated to perpetuating craft. It seemed promising until our correspondence made it apparent that despite lengthy efforts to articulate our mission, the coordinator could only manage to arrange a dead-end conversation with Grantmakers in the Arts. To their credit, however, ASF hooked us up with an attorney experienced in the non-profit world, the late David Seaman, whom we eventually invited to join the foundation's board. Another source of positive input came from Bruce Payne, executive director of the Shelly and Donald Rubin Foundation. Extrapolating from his experience in launching the Rubin Museum of Art dedicated to the collection, display, and preservation of the art and cultures of the Himalayas, he understood our quest and offered valuable advice. Given the prospect of finding original crafters comparable to the quilters, he surmised that if organized at all, they would probably not be qualified to receive money from a non-profit. The solution, he counseled, was the legitimate deployment of funding to assist their legal expenses for incorporation as a non-profit.

More enthusiasm than practical advice came from the Director of Folk & Traditional Arts at National Endowment for the Arts, who wrote, "I'm always happy to hear from folks who are interested in supporting folk and traditional arts. There are precious few in my experience." His suggestions were skewed toward Native American basket weaving and other traditions. While recognizing the incomparable heritage and variety of indigenous material cultures, the foundation was unprepared to enter this domain. The politics of authenticating contemporary Native American crafts and lending support to their practitioners is fraught with many obstacles. A few examples will suffice to illustrate our dilemma.

Dale Rosengarten, an anthropologist, curates the Special Collections in the Addlestone Library at the College of Charleston. A longtime resident of South Carolina and connoisseur of the traditions of Lowcountry basketry, she organized a site visit for us in 2009. The basket-makers are descendants of the Gullah people, the term applied to communities of escaped slaves who settled in the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia and preserved some African cultural and linguistic traditions. Coiled basket-weaving was part of the cultural assemblage imported from Africa and adapted to local conditions and materials including the use of sweetgrass (sea grass) and bullrush reeds. The baskets were used originally for threshing rice on the Carolina plantations. During the late colonial period cotton replaced rice on the plantations and the baskets' functionality declined until the early 20th century when a New York department store entrepreneur organized production and marketing of what became known as Lowcountry baskets. From the mid-20th century onwards, individual basket-makers sold their work from small booths

along Highway 17 running north of Charleston through the town of Mt. Pleasant. There are also about ten basket-makers who ply their wares in the old colonial market in downtown Charleston. One or two men practice the craft but it is dominated by women, the most famous of whom, Mary Jackson, was the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant. Her work is collected by local museums and prominently showcased at the Charleston airport. Jackson’s career is an exception to the precarious existence of contemporary Lowcountry basket-makers. Their work is time-consuming and the raw materials have become harder to cultivate. Prices for their baskets are therefore very high, and it is impossible to compete with imported knock-off baskets for sale in some downtown shops.

We traveled to South Carolina hoping to figure out how the foundation might assist in perpetuating the craft. Dr. Rosengarten introduced us to some of the basket-makers and brought us to a board meeting of their non-profit group. Our interactions with the basket-makers were informal. They welcomed us into their homes and displayed many fine examples of their work. Discussions at their board meeting focused on the problem of beach erosion and the dwindling supply of sea grass. The members expressed the need for a dialog with regional eco-activists to determine how conservation efforts might permit them to harvest enough fiber to continue their craft. The difference between picking the sea grass for free and purchasing a substitute was of tremendous concern. We asked about production, how many baskets they usually made per year, where they sold them, and prices. Competition for tourists at the downtown market is quite stiff, we learned, and there is apparently an unspoken hierarchy among the sellers. Making things worse, the Great Recession was at its nadir, fewer tourists drove along Highway 17 than in past years and those who did were reluctant to purchase baskets at almost any price. The economic crisis was threatening the very existence of this craft. Not that any of these individuals would ever stop making baskets, rather they feared their children would not take up a practice with little or no remunerative rewards.

Rosengarten also arranged meetings with representatives from the McKissick Museum (University of South Carolina) and the Avery Center for African American Culture (College of Charleston). College administrators are singularly focused on raising money. In this case, they tried to ascertain the foundation’s grant-making criteria and how our interest in Lowcountry basketry might be interpreted to their advantage. The Avery Center director showed us a poorly organized collection of regional artifacts featuring a few baskets with the suggestion that maybe we could help their preservation effort. The McKissick, two hours away in Columbia, sent a representative who touted their extensive collection of Gullah and African American material culture. Our hosts pressed hard yet had few ideas about how the living, active craft of Lowcountry basketry could be rescued.

Two strategies for collaboration emerged from our conversations. We could support institutional efforts at Avery or McKissick that were several steps removed from the actual manufacture of Lowcountry baskets, or we could channel money to the makers in the form of support for their extended community. Rosengarten wrapped them in a single proposal for the foundation to underwrite a series of educational programs at the University of South Carolina and simultaneously two summer camps for children, one run by basket-makers collective (SCAFA), the other by the Avery Center. Interspersed throughout these projects would be basket-making demonstrations and instructions for children from 8 to 12 years-old. The educational program promised to use “the basket as a paradigm” for university students to “explore the role of hand crafts and creative expression in the modern world” and would feature a practicum. The summer camps envisioned an overall pedagogy of Gullah culture that would “encourage kids from basket making families to preserve the legacy handed down by their ancestors including sweetgrass basket making, Gullah storytelling, and the art of quilt making.”

While modest in terms of the amount requested, the proposal was overwhelming in its scope and expectations. The various curricula focused on conveying many facets of Gullah culture but left unanswered questions about its intended audience. The USC program offered no evidence as to the potential enrollment numbers, whereas the summer camp activities focused on children and adolescents. Actual basket-making was relegated to no more than a few hours, at best a limited exposure to activities they presumably witnessed at home but more likely a form of busy-work for distracted youngsters. Generally, the proposal synthesized an array of needs and desires from a diverse community of stakeholders in local Gullah culture – the makers, their extended families, academics, and community activists. The collective message conveyed a sense of desperation concerning the lack of public resources. Having approached the community with what we believed was a legitimate mission to foster the continued manufacture of Lowcountry baskets, the foundation was now being asked to fill a gaping hole left in the wake of government neglect and social disempowerment. If this was the price of resuscitating basket-making culture, then our mission was too narrowly defined and our treasury far too limited to meet the goals established by the community.

Not wanting to abandon the quest altogether we countered with our own proposal to create and endow a faculty chair in Lowcountry basketry at the College of Charleston. The foundation would provide an annual salary for a position to be filled on a rotating basis by peer-selected basket-makers in consultation with Rosengarten and the Avery Center. We would further outfit the basket-making studio that would be open to all students at the university. This formula, we hoped, would function as a direct grant to the craftswomen and satisfy the mechanics of grant administration and reporting through the agency of the university. The one-year rotating appointments would assist them in qualifying for faculty benefits thereby guaranteeing each



recipient and her family thirty months of healthcare coverage (one-year coverage plus the discounted eighteen-month COBRA extension). Finally, offering a course in Lowcountry basketry to the entire student body of approximately 2,500 undergraduates might spark a demand for more courses in Gullah culture. Given our limited resources and without invoking the lingo of business models, we thought this was an economical plan to address the basket makers' basic needs while satisfying our mission.

The negative response was clear. "We all agree that educating the public about the history and practice of the Lowcountry basket will help assure the future of the art. We fear, however, that your proposal to fund a studio art course taught by a basket maker would not be acceptable to the College of Charleston and runs counter to the artists' desire to keep the tradition within its historic community." It meant that the Avery Center was unwilling to jeopardize its own position on campus by challenging the college administration to create a faculty position for individuals who probably did not themselves possess baccalaureate degrees. Yet such appointments are commonplace in the art departments of major universities, and this reasoning was probably a smokescreen to safeguard the exclusive lines of craft transmission within the Gullah community. The idea of excluding access to craft knowledge on ethnic or racial grounds posed a moral dilemma. Can a social group lay claim to a given craft and allow it to disappear by refusing access to outsiders? We did not think this was a wise policy because all human techniques are subject to diffusion and modification. To counter inequalities in the teaching and dissemination of knowledge or science by withholding one's own knowledge appeared antithetical to the foundation's mission of crafts preservation.

South Carolina's Lowcountry three-hundred-year-old tradition now faces extinction. Beach erosion, the result of South Carolina's environmental mismanagement, has cost the weavers a free, common source of the once abundant seagrasses used to weave their winnowing baskets. Rampant urbanization of Greater Charleston and the elimination of public funding have taken away playgrounds, parks, and other safe recreational spaces for their children. Finally, an interstate superhighway (I-526), built for tractor-trailers and thru-traffic, has isolated the Mt. Pleasant community and left its roadside stalls to fallow. Themselves worthy examples of vernacular architecture, these little structures once served as open-air workshops that invited tourists to pull over, browse, and negotiate a purchase. Now they appear dilapidated and forlorn, sporadically occupied by the older weavers as much out of habit as hope for a sale or two. Even if their grandchildren have acquired the craft, they understand there are no longer any motorists a mile or two up the road, no revival on the horizon.

Three years later we traveled to New Orleans to research the craft of Mardi Gras Indian beadwork. The elaborate costumes worn during Mardi Gras and other Second Line marches reflect a syncretic (possibly Creole) tradition of indeterminate origin. Mostly African-American

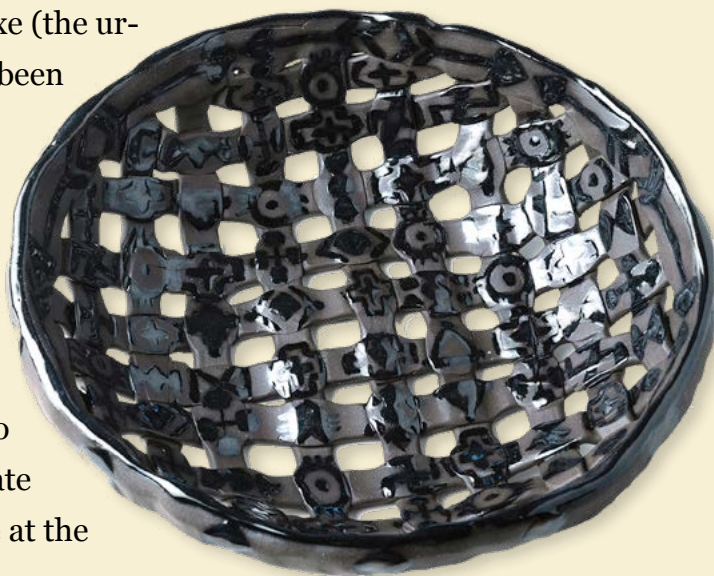
participants have reinterpreted Native American wampum beadwork as the signature of uptown tribes, distinguished from downtown tribes whose fashions are adorned mainly with feathers. Uptown beaders work year-round on their costumes to compete for the title of “the prettiest” during the raucous Mardi Gras ceremonies. Behind the pageant lies a season of intense and often secretive crafting to develop original themes for the ceremonial dress of chiefs and their retinues. Absent public sponsorship individual beaders invest considerable time and expense in quest of the prestige associated with winning or defending the “prettiest” title. New Orleans is a rich setting for the exercise of such performances when the working poor can assert their membership in the city’s cultural order. Competitive dressing used to overcome social anomie has been characterized by one anthropologist working in a similar setting as the “political economy of elegance”.<sup>2</sup> Chiefly lineages such as Yellow Pocahontas established by the late Tutti Montana maintain their exalted status by transmitting the craft through the generations. Tutti’s modest house in Tremé has become a private museum where his widow curates a rotating displaying from among dozens of his beaded costumes. Their son, Daryl, has his own workshop and is always in the thick of Mardi Gras Indian competitions. Like many other New Orleans traditions however, the craft suffered a heavy blow from Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Although Mardi Gras continues to thrive, we learned that residential displacement, the breakdown of public education, and youthful infatuation with high-tech gaming threaten the craft’s future. We spoke with Daryl and Chief Walter Landry of the Black Mohawks about the difficulty in attracting youth to their craft and eventually funded them to jointly conduct a Mardi Gras Indian summer intensive workshop under the aegis of the Xavier University arts department. The results were disappointing. A separate grant from the Arts Council of New Orleans did not arrive on time forcing curtailment of the program from twelve to six weeks. The proposal anticipated recruiting about 20 youths from 10 to 14 years-old, but attendance was so sparse that administrators filled it with children of the Xavier faculty and staff. This seemingly confirmed our trepidations about experimenting with community-related craft projects. Comparisons to lanyard-making at summer camps were impossible to ignore, likewise the overall impression of craft used as a daycare pacifier.

Yet another example of the obstacles one encounters by offering support to independent crafters arose with our inquiry into the production of kapa, traditional Hawaiian bark cloth. Our awareness was sparked by an obituary for Puanani Kanemura VanDorpe (1933-2014) “who helped revive the ancient Hawaiian art of kapa cloth-making and became a leading authority on the subject through many years of exhaustive self-study and experimentation.” The article explained that kapa production had disappeared entirely from Hawaii until VanDorpe learned the methods during an extended residence in Fiji during the late 1960s. Upon returning home VanDorpe spent a decade studying the prized collection of kapa at Honolulu’s Bishop Museum and experimenting with production and dyeing techniques. It was a process of trial and error requiring the input of

scientists and linguists and testing traditional natural resources, including mulberry tree bark and root scrapings, saps, resins and berries. She also commissioned local artists to fabricate traditional kapa tools. Credited for single-handedly reviving this lost tradition and inspiring a new generation of kapa-makers VanDorpe was declared “a Living Treasure of Hawaii” in 1991.<sup>3</sup>

The article led us to Professor Fred Kalani Meineke, VanDorpe’s friend and collaborator who had guided her research in the Bishop Museum. His initial response was quite positive. “I will be meeting soon with indigenous apprentices and artisans to discuss the possibility of applying for a research and teaching grant from the Ddora Foundation. Thank you again for your interest in the perpetuation of bark cloth production and the life-long research and production of Puanani Kanemura.” A month later he wrote, “I met with several interested parties and distributed your information. While they may or may not contact you in the near future, they do know about your Foundation and how to reach you.” His well-chosen words and the subsequent absence of any follow-up testifies to frictions, if not outright resistance, to the influences external to the craft. Our foundation website offers explicit instructions for grant applications and emphasizes IRS compliance rules. Registering as a non-profit organization and semi-annual reporting are, on the one hand, laborious procedures having nothing to do with practicing the craft. Even with the assistance of someone like Professor Meineke it might be problematic, on the other hand, for a few devoted craftsmen to suddenly acquire recognition and cash from the mainland. What type of social disruptions might that provoke in the small network of Puanani Kanemura VanDorpe’s apprentices? Not worth the trouble evidently.

Do we insult craft by relegating its defining characteristic to the status of the dependent clause, “merely for one’s own pleasure”? And by failing to explore the social implications of this phrase, do we not dismiss a central evolutionary theme inherent in the transmission of craft technique down through the ages? The basic gestures constitutive of craft – the force and angle necessary to strike stone upon stone to fashion an Achulean hand-axe (the ur-tool of the Paleolithic) – could not possibly have been regarded as the drudgery commonly associated with modern labor. Essential to the survival of the human species, crafts would never have diffused so widely unless experienced as a pleasurable social activity. Like music, dance, and sports their intangible appeal lies in the felicity derived through associational practice. No amount of money or other enticement can separate them from the cycle of learning and performance at the heart of every culture.



Jolie Stahl, “Fruit Basket” stoneware 2019

## SUPPORTING CRAFT TODAY

While we continue to research craft traditions, the foundation established a default position by soliciting grant applications from select craft schools. We conducted preliminary site visits in each field to ascertain relevant programs and enrollments. We also participated in week long training sessions, one in Appalachian basketry at the John C. Campbell Folk School (JCCFS) in Brasstown, NC, another in Rumford fireplace construction at Yestermorrow Design/Build School in Waitsfield, VT. Operating continuously since 1925 Campbell is an example of the Danish *olkehojskole* (folk school) movement dedicated to preserve rural traditions in the face of industrialization. Its American founders envisioned the folk school as an alternative to the higher-education facilities that drew young people away from family farms in the rural southern states. The school sits on a beautiful campus with student housing, an organic garden, a large refectory, and various crafts studios. Craft offerings include basketry, jewelry, metal work, wood turning, textile arts, and blacksmithing. The catalog has evolved into a Whole Earth cornucopia of crafts offered as classes from weekend intensives to nine-week residencies. Themes such as Scandinavian Heritage week, Shaker week, or an Arts & Crafts revival are part of an ever-widening curriculum of new activities for crafters throughout the non-stop calendar year. The school draws skilled instructors from nearby cities like Knoxville and Asheville who teach at all levels of proficiency. Students range from college-age to retirees. During our 2008 visit we shared a cabin with a North Carolina couple. The woman enrolled in a one-week weaving course while her husband spent his days on the cabin's shady porch poring over reams of court documents. He was a former judge pulled from retirement to assist the state in adjudicating thousands of subprime mortgage cases. A large contingent of blacksmiths, some from as far away as Washington state, testified to the widespread and highly gendered popularity of this craft. A work-study program (grounds-keeping and kitchen work, mainly) and a scholarship endowment furnish tuition supplements for eager yet cash-strapped crafters.

Following discussions with the director we invited grant applications to benefit work-study students in the belief that they would comprise a youthful cohort embarking on alternative careers in craft. The administration sent detailed reporting on each scholarship recipient, their qualifications, area of concentration, and personal testimonies. Our goal for reporting has been to collect longitudinal data to understand if scholarship recipients are able to find employment geared toward their chosen craft. With sufficient demographics, we expect to extrapolate from career trends published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and synthesize this information into funding proposals to Ford, Rockefeller and similar entities. The rationale as explained to the development officers at JCCFS and other crafts schools is to help them increase enrollment by expanding our mission's footprint within the larger philanthropic ecosystem. Three years later

enrollment was still trending toward older students including middle-age work-study grantees. We interpreted this as a reflection of the uncertain economic recovery with more employment opportunities for the young while those who lost stable jobs in the recession were forced to re-tool or pursue hobbies. In the words of the folk school director this indicated an alarming trend toward “adult daycare.”

Most emphatically we do not minimize the desire of middle aged and older persons to follow craft. Either as an alternative form of employment or the further development of lifeways, their newly acquired skills are forms of personal enrichment destined to flow through generational lines. Whoever has spent time in a grandparent’s kitchen or basement workshop absorbing the careful gestures involved in baking bread or building a cabinet can testify to invaluable ethos embodied in a family tradition. Age notwithstanding the more craft skills circulating the greater the potential for interpersonal collaboration and freedom from the commercialization of every household consumable from soap to blankets. Craft can cement vital bonds among seniors who are often isolated or reduced to participating in busywork activities. Yet philanthropy needs to be responsible for its role in the distribution of scarce resources especially during periods of rising inequality. As we observed in New Orleans and Charleston young people at loose ends career-wise are exposed to tremendous risk without the protection of any social safety net.

We proposed to redress this imbalance and boost younger enrollment by funding a two-year outreach experiment to promote the JCCFS at the Folk Festival in Newport, Rhode Island. In the spirit of the recent Lollapalooza fairways connecting the various musical stages, the folk school set up a booth outfitted with videos of its craft classes. An expert woodcarver demonstrated his skills while catalogs and raffle tickets were distributed in exchange for mailing information. A professional banjo was given away on the last day of the festival. The results were dismal; from a thousand sign-ups each year, the school received only a handful of follow-up inquiries and no applications for enrollment.

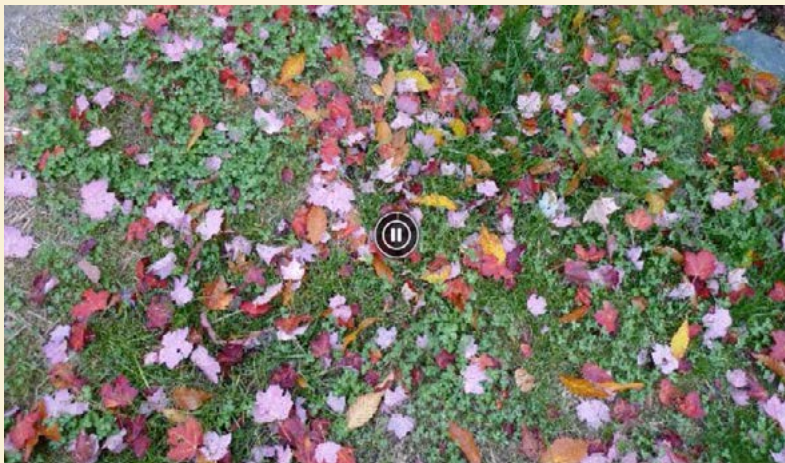
If the John C. Campbell Folk School stands for the conservation of traditional crafts reminiscent of pre-industrial America, Yestermorrow Design/Build school is the cutting edge of a neo-counterculture. It has no problem attracting millennials. Located on a 38-acre campus in Vermont’s Mad River Valley the Yestermorrow School began about thirty years ago as a reincarnation of the nation’s first design/build program at the defunct Godard College, original hotbed of Whole Earth activism. It has since become a crossroads of eco-conscious building arts and engineering led by professional ecologists, architects, and students. It helps that the neighboring regions of the Green Mountain state are flush with wealthy second- and third-homeowners who can finance experimental architecture. For example, Warren, the town next door, is a haven for architectural firms engaged in planning luxury homes and ski resorts. In

addition to its design/build programs for ultra-green, sustainable dwellings, Yestermorrow's curriculum incorporates the talents of skilled local wood workers, masons, and metalsmiths. Resiliency is the current catchphrase; permaculture the guiding ethos of the mindful young students exploring possibilities for survival on a planet hurtling toward oblivion.

To get a better understanding of how design/build related to traditional craft we signed up for a week long course in Rumford fireplace construction. Renowned for the heat-producing efficiency of its shallow depth, the Rumford fireplace is based on an 18th century design prevalent throughout the colonies until after the Revolutionary War. This fireplace burns logs vertically, as opposed to the familiar horizontal stack, and depending on the size of the firebox can effectively project heat into very large rooms with half the fuel normally consumed by today's standard fireplaces. The trick lies not only in the relative dimensions of the firebox but also in the design of interior throat and positioning of the lintel to maximize airflow inside the flue. The decline of the Rumford owes as much to politics as anything else because its originator Sir Benjamin Thompson Lord Rumford was apparently a Tory or redcoat loyalist who fled the new republic in 1795.<sup>4</sup> Since then, according to our team leader Buzz, Americans have been wasting fuel in smoky, inefficient fireplaces.

New England's premier Rumford expert, Buzz has built or converted hundreds of fireplaces according to this design. We were joined by Tyler, a young architect, and Gerald who journeyed from Saskatchewan to learn how to build a Rumford in his own home. A well-to-do collector of Italian motorcycles had recently purchased a two-story house in Waitsfield and agreed to donate his residence and materials for this project. All that was necessary besides Buzz and Tyler's skills and tools and our labor were a few hundred dollars-worth of cement, cinder block, firebrick, ceramic flue, and some large slabs of soapstone scavenged nearby. Operating from a collaborative sketch of how the fireplace and mantel would look in the living room, we began construction in the basement and worked up to the fireplace, flue, and chimney. Despite the autumn chill and constant rain, it was an exhilarating experience of craft at its improvisational best. We carted and stacked bricks, mixed "mud," and assembled the flue amidst a constant flow of banter laden with guidance, deliberative pauses, occasional mishaps, and one heated argument. By the second day we had established what felt like a rhythmic workflow and natural division of labor that deferred to Buzz's expertise at critical junctures such as the spiraling of bricks to create a proper throat. Although it looked sloppy the dimensions and structure counted most; mortar would do the rest, and the internal combustion chamber would remain hidden behind the wall. We chose slabs for the lintel and mantel, measured them, and then shielded our faces as Tyler attacked them with his diamond-tipped chain saw. Although cosmetically still incomplete, we had a warm fire burning by the weekend.

In subsequent discussions with the Yestermorrow's administrators we emphasized the foundation's commitment to the sort of hands-on training offered by instructors like Buzz. Several months later we received a grant proposal requesting funds for curriculum development. It explained that some of the school's courses were now incorporated into degree programs under an articulation agreement with the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and asked for the foundation to support prospective faculty for new graduate-level courses. It offered few specifics while creating the impression of an ever-expanding curriculum. In the absence of requests for scholarship assistance, we concluded that the school had little trouble filling its bunks with full-fare students. It was now embarking on a planned expansion including a capital campaign that seemingly would provide more opportunities for the leading architects to do their thing.



"Yestermorrow Design Build" movie

[Click to see video](#)

Although the foundation explicitly does not support capital projects, the proposal seemed like a formula to pull us into the speculative business of enrollment anyway. It neither raised ideas about supporting more local craftsmen like Buzz nor committed to follow-up reporting. Essentially, the ruling cadre of professional architects was steering the administration to grow, if necessary, at the expense of the vitality we had just experienced. Another issue that sealed our decision against funding was the relation between philanthropy and the building trades. Two corporations, Lowes and Home Depot ("home despot" to Yestermorrow students), have monopolized supplies for the building trades. The lion's share of their business relies on debt-strapped do-it-yourselfers. They undermine unions while starving their own workers. Their profits have skyrocketed largely as a function of the corrupt mortgage industry and put the entire country at risk of another recession. Shouldn't these monopolies be contributing in cash or in-kind to Yestermorrow and similar schools? How does it benefit craft for a small foundation to expend its resources in the face of monopolies whose actions encourage the deskilling society?

The Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology offers two-year associate degrees and certificates programs in the industrial trades. Although not exactly a crafts school, its mission and history attracted our attention. Located in Lancaster, PA the college was founded in 1905 with a bequest from Thaddeus Stevens (1792-1868) a Civil War era congressman and prominent abolitionist. Stevens was an early proponent of free public education and deserves much credit for the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the U.S. Constitution. His bequest read,

*They shall be carefully educated in the various branches of English education and all industrial trades and pursuits. No preference shall be shown on account of race or color in their admission or treatment. Neither poor Germans, Irish or Mahometan, nor any others on account their race or religion of their parents, shall be excluded. They shall be fed at the same table.*

Interpreted by the current administration, the college is dedicated to educating Pennsylvania's "economically and socially disadvantaged as well as other qualified students for skilled employment in a diverse, ever changing workforce and for full effective participation as citizens." Modern technology dominates the curriculum with training on an impressive array of machinery including sophisticated robots, much of it imported from Germany and Japan. Learning how to interact with this equipment is a very important skill although not strictly within the foundation's mission. On the other hand, the college's programs in carpentry, masonry, metalwork, and cabinetry teach skills fundamental to the building trades. The senior capstone project unites carpenters and masons with fellow student-electricians and plumbers to construct a single-family house, each one added to Lancaster's stock of affordable homes. This combination of basic skills and community spirit seemed like an agenda worth supporting if we could find a way to elevate the level of engagement in traditional crafts to balance appreciation for handwork compared to flashy high-tech pursuits. As if to demonstrate its practical-minded views the college proposed awards to graduates who showed potential in the field of legacy crafts. In collaboration with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, the foundation now offers stipends for summer apprenticeships in historical preservation at numerous sites throughout the state such as the Daniel Boone Homestead and the Hamilton Mansion. One apprentice engaged in preservation work at Philadelphia's Fairmont Park Trust voiced tremendous satisfaction in his newfound appreciation for the craft embedded in the buildings nestled within the inner-city playgrounds of his youth. Contained within a familiar landscape this relationship between the remote colonial past and personal memories approximates linkages inherent in the exercise of all crafts. Better described by the anthropologist Tim Ingold as a *taskscape*, his activity synchronized the performance of a skill set within a living environment. Even in the context of Pennsylvania's museums, the skills essential to maintaining a craft are often reflexive in the sense of restoring the objective past while remembering the source of one's own personal narrative. Exercising



this craft on the masonry and woodwork of an 18th century house is certainly not geared toward reproducing its original features rather an interpretation using contemporary tools and materials. Similarly, the apprentice craftsman discovered a formula for personal development, his sense of place and accomplishment therein, that would never occur in the most skilled interaction with high-tech robots.

The North Bennet Street School continues established traditions in cabinetry and furniture making, violin making, piano repair, bookbinding, jewelry, and locksmithing. Its students enter a flow of craft seemingly unbroken since the first industrial revolution. There is something invigorating about the urban environment. Setting themselves to work amidst the red brick edifices and cobblestone streets of colonial-era Boston, North Bennet's students occupy an important space in the city's contemporary taskscape of scientists, academicians, doctors, lawyers, architects, manufacturers, financiers, insurers, and real estate professionals. Next to them, the crafters are low-tech artisans yet they somehow complement the hierarchies of knowledge (but not power) and skill that define Boston as convivial place. Like any of the city's other venerable colleges and universities, one gets a superior education at North Bennet. Graduates won't necessarily get their dream job, but collectively their efforts are equally important to the city's notoriety as a center of creative thought and research. It might in fact be wrong to describe the North Bennet crafters in terms of their filling a void in a taskscape, rather it would be more accurate to say they have muscled their way from obscurity back into the urban framework. The resurgence of craft here is certainly facilitated by the surrounding affluence. With the highest concentration of millionaires in the country, Boston is a genuine market for finely crafted furniture and cabinetry; its well-endowed orchestras and renown music schools are natural settings for luthiers and piano technicians; similarly, its university libraries and rare books collections will always require the skills of expert bookbinders and preservationists. Craft seems somehow more prominent in Boston than New York. With its division into administrative boroughs, business districts, and ethnic enclaves craft thrives there too, but the city's devotion to commerce – remarked upon by travelers even when it was called New Amsterdam – obscures craft's visibility. Craft goes begging for a place in New York and, when not concealed, is on display in its own museum or as part of the wider range of arts to which it is unfavorably compared.

Nor does craft thrive in brownfields. Nothing of the sort obtains in the decomposed factory cities to Boston's north and south. Lowell, Brockton, and Fall River are wastelands of the second industrial revolution whose populations now struggle for subsistence wages in service and shitty retail jobs. It would be folly to speak of a craft revival in towns where many people must choose between paying the rent and other necessities such as nutritious food and healthcare. Not so crazy however to encourage its young people to use craft as an escape route, a more accessible career path especially in the context of bad public schools and a cruel educational apartheid that

neglects students' natural ability. Craft is less exposed to the "tyranny of meritocracy" imposed by high stakes testing and the fraudulent college loan industry. At North Bennet we found a sense of humility and a sanguine approach to the learning and practicing of skills. Not only did we solicit funding proposals but we eventually invited its president to join our board.

Vävstuga Weaving School lies one-hundred-thirty miles west of Boston along the old Mohawk Trail in the village of Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts. Its founder Becky Ashenden spent her early adult life studying traditional weaving techniques in Sweden. She has translated dozens of books and instructional manuals and teaches her students on imported looms. The refined textiles emerging from her workshops are made from flax grown, processed, and spun into linen thread on her farm. Her house and adjacent studios are crammed with different model looms, a collection based on the evolving proficiencies of her students. Some examples were displayed at the 2014 Handweavers Guild trade show in Providence where we met her and immediately wanted to discuss the modalities of collaboration. It soon became apparent that we could not provide funding to Vävstuga or its students because it operates as a for-profit school and retail center for looms and other weaving supplies.

Recalling some advice from Bruce Payne, director of the Rubin Foundation, we offered to help Becky incorporate an independent non-profit organization that would be devoted exclusively to a 16-week intensive weaving program. A year later Fabric of Life, Inc. accepted its first scholarship students. Its Väv Immersion program offers students more than a simple skill, exposing them to the aesthetic and cultural traditions of Scandinavian hand weavers. Becky hopes her students will pursue professional opportunities such as museum work, production weaving, textile retail, and teaching. Owing to a single-minded devotion to her craft, Becky has created a whirlwind of activity in an otherwise sleepy, post-industrial village. In her opinion, "the preservation of the tradition, culture, and function of hand weaving will be carried forward throughout her students' lifetime and into future generations in many rich and exciting ways." Is it sustainable?

A more recent inquiry led us to Chris Pelletieri a stone carver who after graduating college apprenticed for almost a decade with several European master-carvers at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan. When work on the statuary of the central portal of the Cathedral's western façade was completed in 1997 the workshop closed. Owing to a lack of funds construction on the one-hundred-five-year-old church was halted, the new generation of stone carvers was left to fend for itself. Pelletieri found work restoring billionaires' mansions and eventually got a prestigious commission from Robert A. M. Stern Architects to design and construct an archway at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, NY. "I was confident," he explained, "that if I hit a homerun for them, they would recognize the value and be back for more."

The Cathedral allowed him to use its idle workshop for the Marist College job. He worked alone using a ten-ton crane to move giant stone blocks effortlessly at the push of a button, an

experience he described as a “unique and amazing opportunity.” Not long after completing his project however the Cathedral sold off the heavy equipment and demolished the stone carvers’ shed to make space for a high-rise apartment building. They leveraged the property “just to keep the doors open and the heat on.” By 2014 Pelletieri had lost his work space. Robert A.M. Stern was not ringing his phone off the hook. Nor was anyone else. Three years later we found him burrowed into a shabby freight yard loading bay in the industrial wasteland of Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Undeterred he has created the Pellettieri Stone Carvers’ Academy as a 501(c)(3) organization. Yet questions remain. Where he will find work space? Who wants to become a stone carver?

## THE ARENA OF CRAFT

**B**efore returning to the spacious workshops of the yacht building school, we need to clarify the purpose for undertaking this itinerary. There is no roadmap for a sustainable philanthropic intervention specific to craft in the 21st century. By roadmap I am suggesting a formula corresponding to the trajectories and possible outcomes open to modern craftspersons, the where and the when they might converge onto grounds once staked out by masters. Craft schools, loose-knit guilds, informal circles, associations, and even museums comprise a vast, ungovernable territory populated by a diversity of enthusiasts from weekend hobbyists to accomplished practitioners, scholars and critics thereof. Another sector encompasses the sometimes brilliant yet generally dull studio crafters who aspire to become solo exhibitors in fine art galleries while selling their wares at seasonal fairs and on the internet. There are designers who inject craft into luxury commodities and likewise artists who endow their works with craft techniques. Not to be excluded is the newest constituency of makers whose computerized tools introduce another dimension to design and execution using both traditional and non-traditional materials. Were John Ruskin or William Morris to experience the dizzying individuation of today's craft scene, might they not opt for the cold comfort of 19th century mass production? Who can parse these myriad creations as signs of resistance, not to a hyper-commoditized world but to one where robots have seized the initiative by laying claim to the improvisational skills once thought to define human activity? Human labor in the age of intelligent machines, so aptly theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, is a struggle involving the unconscious as much as energetics.<sup>5</sup> Who owns our imagination? What determines its contours and limits? Are we struggling against the naked instrumentality of machines, they ask, or against the social dynamic that assembles us into an army of fleshy robots?

The pages of *American Craft Magazine* offer some perspective on these questions by graphically illustrating what one might reasonably construe as a desperate attempt to defy machines. Akin to mannerism-gone-wild, it resembles an inverted commodity fetishism in which valuation derives almost exclusively from the object's novelty. For Richard Sennett, our contemporary theorist of the craftsman, such displays of technique are "meant to silence their audience into submission." They disqualify themselves as examples of good craft otherwise defined as "neither amateur nor virtuoso" rather the "middle ground of work."<sup>6</sup> They exist merely because they are laden with opportunities for pedantic displays of skill evident, for example, in the studied reproduction of imperfection. One is tempted to label this the battered blue jeans syndrome. Is it symptomatic of craft's enslavement to capitalism's quest for new fashions and planned obsolescence? Or does the incessant recombination of styles – irreducible to any formal description – herald a new wave? Are we standing at a crossroads formed by the

deterritorialization/reterritorialization of many different cultural traditions, some received in the abstract through the information revolution, others introduced in real time thanks to the constant waves of refugee migrations? To borrow another concept from Deleuze and Guattari, does contemporary craft not reflect the intensification of nomadism brought about by wars and natural catastrophes? Assuming we could recognize such a critical moment, would we even know what to do with it?



Jolie Stahl, "In Flight"  
stoneware 2019

Only, I think, if we can identify the arena of craft in the sense of its place in the schematics of contemporary economic activity. Without an adequate concept of the space – where craft is performed and its location vis-à-vis wage labor – philanthropists cannot gauge the impact of their contributions. If we are simply trying to compensate for the decline of vocational training as an alternative path to gainful employment, then our efforts to offer scholarships or build workshops will never fulfill the need created by the abdication of public responsibility to this form of education. Our mission however lies elsewhere in promoting craft understood as a pursuit distinct from mass production and somewhat removed from the vicissitudes of commerce. As described in the preceding itinerary we view craft as culture expressed in handmade things that have meaning both for those who make them and for those who possess them. In other words, we seek to foster the perpetuation of skills necessary to create objects

– small, medium or large – whose embodied social and esthetic values cannot be separated from their use-values.

The most eloquent statement of this principle comes from the historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich who excavates the social history of New England by carefully examining the provenance of handcrafted baskets, cupboards, and textiles. Tracing the techniques of their manufacture and vectors of inheritance Ulrich renders an extraordinary narrative from the perspective of “homespun” objects and their owners. For example, a colonial-era wooden cupboard decorated with the painted name of its original owner, Hannah Barnard, serves as “a link between generations of women who bore her name ... and helps us see that the nineteenth century Americans who attached labels to old shoes, spinning wheels, sheets, towels, table cloths, and cupboards were not only memorializing their families. They were creating them.” In other words, the cupboard’s handcrafted design and durable construction conferred upon its owner the means to construct a tangible genealogy for her descendants.<sup>7</sup>

The workshops where such objects were made were integral to a self-sufficient regional economy. Their makers used local materials and sometimes experimented with techniques learned

from Native Americans, African slaves, and settlers of different national origins. New England's seaports, rivers and overland trails connected artisans to trade networks stretching from Europe north to Canada and west as far as the Great Lakes. In almost every phase the colonial economy was a cross-cultural affair. If one constructed a software program to simulate the growth of craft production the model would begin by showing the first tentative exchanges between natives and settlers of materials and information occurring at the fringes of colonial settlements on coastal plains, river banks, cataracts, and at the forest's edge. Although plagued by violence and disease these places are also the sites for the diffusion of technical skills and bartering, even seasonal trading with established exchange rates between beaver pelts and iron tools, for example. As the simulated region develops trans-Atlantic commerce would furnish the workshops with a greater variety of tools, for instance, looms whose finished textiles enter previously established trade networks. Ocean-going commerce would introduce the maritime trades in ports where boat builders, chandlers, and sail-makers would supplement their own skills with a multiplicity of alternative techniques and materials. As the program advances, some workshops grow into small factories while others relocate closer to rivers as power sources for new machinery. The division of labor becomes increasingly complex reflecting not only an explosion of commerce but also a diverse multi-talented population. Now poised on the brink of the industrial revolution – coal-powered railroads, telegraphy, and electrified factories – this simulated model of nineteenth century New England furnishes the context in which Hannah Barnard's cupboard embodied meaning not only for her direct descendants but also for an inspired twenty-first century historian able to trace its origins back to a town and a workshop if not an identifiable craftsman.

By contrast the expository narratives of craft sketched by Richard Sennett and Matthew Crawford restrict the workshop to a kind of cage where the *animal laborans* (the former's term) learns and practices his or her trade. Both books are devoted to cognitive analysis of craft techniques and probe the bio-mechanics of how a craftsman interacts with raw materials. By describing the kinetics of prehensile (hand-tool articulation) gestures, their underlying neuromuscular impulses (mind-body articulation), and consequent psychological effects (self-other articulation), they aim to recapitulate the evolution of human labor for which the ultimate achievement is freedom. Getting there requires the probity of a morally centered craftsman who for these authors is emblematic of social control, attention, and self-regulation. To Sennett the benefits derived from handwork contain the ideal of self-satisfaction, a virtue that presupposes a society where the avenues of "experience" are democratically accessible to everyone. Yet acquiring skill is not a democratic process because the apprentice must submit to the authority of the master's standards. "The craftsman's workshop," he observes, "is one site in which the modern, perhaps unresolvable conflict between autonomy and authority plays out."<sup>8</sup>

It's hard to see how confinement in an authoritarian workshop promotes freedom, yet Sennett assures us that the "fraternity of people who share the same skill" leads to the cooperative society envisioned by the 19th century utopian socialist thinkers.<sup>9</sup> Although he condemns the political absolutism fostered by medieval guilds he extols nonetheless William Ruskin's vision of recuperating a "lost space of freedom" from the very same past.<sup>10</sup> And after pleading cases for the voluntary servitude of the workshop and quality-driven work as measured by quasi-Taylorist "best standards and practices," he unveils the virtuous, loyal craftsmen as the ideal worker who "when the business cycle turns down will stay the course, work longer hours, even take pay cuts rather than desert."<sup>11</sup> Not to worry however because somewhere in his blueprint for a "free and supportive space" for which people will have to fight in modern society" he promises that "good craftsmanship implies socialism"!<sup>12</sup>

Crawford adds the veneer of science here. His craftsman is a "self-responsible" agent possessing a skills-oriented tunnel vision that allows him to cancel the noisy distractions of modern society.<sup>13</sup> He approaches his job with the monomaniacal focus of a professional athlete and similarly strives for recognition through superior performance. To achieve these goals, he becomes one with his tool ("cognitive extension") and conversely induces his mind and body to function like a tool ("embodied perception") by deflecting any extraneous mental stimuli that might interfere with the execution of his tasks. Crawford's craftsman seeks not only unparalleled excellence but also a transformative experience; his profound sense of gratification derives from submission to the machinic unconscious that governs the workshop organization and determines his relations to everyone and everything in it. Whether describing the funky rhythms of a short order cook or symphonic cadences of a pipe organ builder Crawford refers to this state of mind as "the erotics of attention." If this workshop sounds like a pornographic *mise-en-scène*, then it is so by design because cognitive psychology is a branch of evolutionary biology that judges all behavior as a coefficient of reproduction. In this scheme, the workshop becomes a transformative pleasure box, strangely reminiscent of Wilhelm Reich's orgone accumulator, designed to redirect the craftsman's id from coitus onto the realm of skilled handwork.

Make no mistake, these ideas are worth exploring in the context of Frankfurt School sociology, particularly Marcuse's underrated *Eros and Civilization*. Unfortunately, Crawford lets his readers down when he tries to situate his craft workshop in the post-industrial arena. "We are on the cusp of a new renaissance of small-batch, specialty manufacturing in the United States," he contends but like Sennett fails to see the irony of a repurposed workshop populated by the same *animal laborans* who gains little in struggling for anything other than personal gratification. His political message amounts to the familiar 1960s refrain: make love not [class] war. The only struggle is the one of the travails necessary to acquire one's skill set. To meet the challenges of the post-industrial economy he borrows another old cliché: less politics more Zen. "As against the need to transform

the world into something ideal, the erotic nature of attention suggests we can orient ourselves by a selective affection for the world as it is, and join ourselves to it.”<sup>14</sup> Neither unions nor guilds have any place in this workshop; even the fraternal solidarity mentioned by Sennett has disappeared. Crawford forsakes curiosity about the social and economic benefits accruing to its workers, their families and communities offering little to differentiate it from an iron cage subject to the metrics of profits and efficiency. This workshop is the site of an extremely limited freedom because Crawford fails to see the craftsman’s world beyond the workshop.

The consequences of these formalistic approaches to craft are dire because the reality of the present arena of craft is much different. The very image of an open, democratic pathway to a society of craftsmen reflects the authors’ unfamiliarity with real working conditions. When they extol the fluid movements and deft calculations of a master chef or proficient line cook they betray an ignorance of the hierarchies and sometimes hellish conditions of the modern restaurant kitchen, a virtual slave galley staffed by vulnerable immigrants willing to suffer long hours in food-prep, fed unpalatable meals, showered in grease, and subject to the whims of a master chef – or worse a celebrity chef – himself bound to fads driven in turn by the insatiable quest for distinction, subjugated to the insanity of multiple supply chains (food, beverage, laundry, utensils, fuel). Squeezed by greedy landlords who force her to court the wealthiest clients, the master chef depends on media reviews that can contribute to her success or destroy it in a matter of hours. Little is left to the imagination when taking account of the competitive environment among the staff especially its jockeying for tips that often wind up in the manager’s pocket. Heat, smoke, harassment, and other pressures contribute to a working environment all too palpable in the emblematic scars of substance abuse and tattoos, as if burns, cuts, and fatigue don’t already come with the territory.<sup>15</sup> The true arena of craft hardly resembles the workshops depicted by Sennett and Crawford; rather it is a treacherous unregulated space no different than the Grand Hotel kitchens of George Orwell’s Paris where the lowest caste of plongeurs were literally indentured to the place not the establishment.<sup>16</sup>

What’s stopping either commentator from seeing the craft workshop as a space by and for social labor? Does it make a difference to any philanthropic intervention in these activities? Again, how can we survey the arena of craft without recourse to models specific to the arts and artistic creativity? Failure to address these questions will only leave us with a socially depleted concept of craft as an activity best suited to the “creative classes” whoever they may be.

The problem in my view resides in the commentators’ avowed pragmatism, a philosophy opposed root and branch to European idealism according to Sennett who places himself in the company of William Pierce and John Dewey as homegrown American defenders against “Hegelianism,” understood in this context as code for Marxist interpretations of labor. The best one can say about pragmatism is to emphasize its minimalist approach to stripping away ideology



and exposing pure practice. For instance, in *Varieties of Religious Experience* Dewey reduces religion to a series of ritual exercises irrespective of belief. He deconstructs a religion into a series of liturgical performances, catechisms, gestures, prescriptive and proscriptive rules for behavior amalgamated to a central belief or theodicy whose contents are deemed secondary because they cannot be directly observed. The believer's recitation of a narrative, scriptural or personal, serves as a purely instrumental conduit into the performative obligations required by every member of the sect or cult. Although we can listen to prayers, we can never know completely a believer's mind. Pragmatism therefore eliminates the cumbersome examination of belief as in orthodoxy by substituting an empirical science of practice as in orthopraxy. Religion for Dewey and his followers resembles a special type of athletics taken up for a variety of reasons, none of them mutually exclusive. This allows one to depict clergy and other hierarchs as simply those sectarians who work-out with great dedication and perform at the top of their game. From there it is also possible to derive a pragmatic theory of democracy such as Dewey presents in his other famous work, *Democracy and Education*: build a school and they will succeed.

When Sennett or Crawford employ a similar methodology to analyze craft and craftsmen, they likewise profess faith in democracy and freedom, explicitly offering the possibility for almost anyone to become craft-proficient as long the apprentice is willing to surrender freedom to the master and dedicate himself to this path. Sennett even subscribes to Max Weber's definition of a vocation as "the sustaining narrative ... the ever-stronger conviction that one was meant to do this one particular thing in one's life."<sup>17</sup> To him the apprentice craftsman resembles the novice in a monastic order. Yet human labor including craft is much different than timeless religious practice. Rather than withdraw from the material world labor transforms it and in so doing also transforms itself. History contains the record of these transformations, and to observe craft in the 21st century is to acknowledge its inseparability from a capitalist market society. Pragmatism, however, makes labor trans-historical and places it beyond reach of critical analysis. It is at once too powerful in its empiricism and too feeble in its inability to recognize labor in its historical forms, its social attachments, and its abstract incarnation as value. Pragmatism allows Sennett to portray the goldsmith as a masterful technician without reference ironically to his social role as the arbiter of physical, monetary value. Pragmatism becomes a hedge, a formula for ignoring the reality of social disequilibrium and its origins in private property. By projecting a trans-historical concept of labor onto the craftsman Sennett traps him in a society founded upon inequality and injustice.

However, Sennett offers his craftsman an escape from the undemocratic workshop through travel and mobility. Reaching back to a 14th century description of the traveling goldsmith he cites a "migratory dynamism" and compares it to the entrepreneurial spirit of modern economic migrants.<sup>18</sup> This improbable conflation of two distant epochs offers an example of the way

pragmatists can play fast and loose with history. It leads to the problematic image of a migrant craftsman arriving at a cosmopolitan air terminal laden with his tools. Yet it contains a kernel of truth because mobility is indeed associated with craft whose skills are mostly portable and which offers the allure of adventure. In a scene from Crawford's ethnography of the pipe organ workshop, all eyes fall upon the arrival of a true journeyman.

*On one of my visits, Robert Hanna was refinishing the casework of the Henry Erben organ. Hanna is not an employee of Taylor and Boody. A specialist in finishes, he is a journeyman in the original, literal sense. He goes wherever the furniture is, traveling by car because the airlines do not allow the chemicals he carries. He is at the very top of his profession, a conservator of multimillion-dollar pieces of furniture, and he makes a lot of money. He is essentially a forensic chemist; he speaks of particular oils, shellacs, acetones, and methylated spirits. He is also a cultural historian, and gave me an impromptu dissertation on the variations in American furniture by regions, periods, the local arboriculture, the ethnicity of the cabinetmaker, and the particular tradition within which he worked (for example, Shaker).<sup>19</sup>*

The journeyman's freedom of movement points to the arena of craft beyond the workshop. It is an open space animated by objects, tools, materials, compounds, and cultural traditions not unlike the one Puanani Kanemura VanDorpe retrieved in Fiji and returned to Hawaii as a "living treasure." By reviving kapa cloth-making through trial-and-error research she opened a line of communication between native Hawaiians and their lapsed ancestral past. The Carolina Lowcountry basket-weavers were able likewise to knot a sacred cord between themselves and their Gullah-speaking ancestors by foraging for seagrass on the same beaches where newly arrived slaves once experimented with substitute materials for those forcibly abandoned in Africa. To paraphrase Laurel Thatcher Ulrich craft is a means for maintaining social bonds through the manufacture and conveyance of handmade objects from one generation to the next.

The workshops here and in our other examples – Vävstuga Weaving School, Yestermorrow Design/Build – are open to a world where free access to materials is still possible. While no longer a reasonable criterion for craft, the idea of openness expresses its inherent differences from wage labor. One can and should get paid to weave a fine linen or build a fireplace, but the contract at the essence of this activity occurs between the makers and the materials they gather and recombine into useful things. This contract elaborates the standards for materials, designs, and assembly that infuse the finished object with the personality of its maker. By personality we don't mean a pleasant or nasty disposition toward others rather the summary of experience, knowledge, and serendipity brought to the task such that no two items, as identical they might seem to the connoisseur, are equivalent if only because they have been manufactured in sequence by an

artisan who has the freedom at any moment to substitute, improvise, or discontinue the activity altogether. Each piece in other words reflects its maker, part of a narrative of the reciprocity between labor and history. Hence craft is not a negotiation involving people and materials within a workshop rather a deliberation about the location and duration of the workshop itself.

The master builder of birch bark canoes, Henry Vaillancourt, eloquently profiled by John McPhee in 1975, claimed the woods of New Hampshire, Maine, and Quebec as his workshop. With a keen eye for selecting materials and a few ordinary tools he produced the finest specimens of traditional indigenous canoes, worthy of the museums where the originals are displayed.<sup>20</sup> Decades after Native American tribes ceased canoe-making, the Northeast Woodlands continued to harbor its craft in the sturdy birch trees waiting patiently for an autodidact like Vaillancourt to take it up by learning the techniques pell-mell from instructional manuals, chance meetings, and experiments.<sup>21</sup> In the terminology of anthropologist Tim Ingold, Vaillancourt was a wayfarer traveling “from place to place, sustaining himself through a continuous engagement with the field of practice, or ... the taskscape that opens along his path.”<sup>22</sup>

This concept of “wayfaring” through space or the taskscape evokes an open, transitive world where a craftsman intervenes “in the fields of force and flow of materials” – stalking, felling, dismembering, and reassembling trees into canoes. Each tree an animate being with exterior bark protecting its organs – roots, trunk, rings, knots, branches, leaves – is distinct within its species. The craftsman recognizes and selects according to his understanding of genetic and environmental forces. He works not by imposing a preconceived form on matter (the so-called hylomorphic model)<sup>23</sup> but through coaxing his materials into a shape determined by decades if not centuries of creative interaction between the environment and humans seeking to bring its abundance into their service. *Homo sapiens* sits atop this natural hierarchy, yet without a healthy respect for the lower orders he endangers the delicate balance of existence for himself and other species.

Anthropologically speaking, craft is that part of the social apparatus that demarcates the limits of a given taskscape as its workshop. It is simultaneously a global and local activity – global in its scope as a science of exchange between humans and nature, local in its direct applications as the art of sustainable social labor. The rules governing the craftsman’s perceptions and actions are thus culturally conditioned, they are also specific to historical time and place. An 18th century Wabanaki birch bark canoe maker might fault Henry Vaillancourt’s techniques or even his finished product. Differences imperceptible to us might possibly lead the former to judge the latter’s canoe devoid of any Wabanaki value. While not denying its utility as a viable mean of transportation, the canoe might appear as the mere product of an Acadian craftsman, descendant of wayfaring newcomers from the Old World with whom the Wabanaki share a history of treaties and other cultural exchanges. What would prevail in these circumstances would be the shared terms for

negotiating a mutually recognizable freedom to navigate and harvest the Northeast Woodlands taskscape without destroying it.

For all his emphasis on mobility and process Ingold's ontology skirts this lingua franca of freedom as a social or historical objective. No longer confined to the pragmatist's workshop, his craftsman traces his narrative as a series of peregrinations through a non-static, ever-evolving world. His individuality emerges from this maelstrom of constant motion as an exercise of free will in an unpredictable, timeless universe. Understood here as a philosophical concept free will may very well guide the craftsman in his choice of projects or collaborators, but it does not fully address the social character of his labor nor even his tools and techniques. Vaillancourt's quest to build the perfect birch bark canoe fits Ingold's interpretation well because there are few if any limitations to the exercise of his craft. The Northeast Woodlands encompass an abundant natural resource or commons straddling three states and two nations.

However, if Lowcountry basket weavers can no longer harvest seagrass along the shore, what recourse do they have to perpetuate their craft? Their envisioned collaboration with the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control to replant and protect the beach dunes was quixotic in the face of the realities of beach erosion and uncertain political support. Like weavers in other parts of the world, they could recycle colorful telephone wire as a substitute for natural materials. But copper wire is more precious than seagrass, scavenging might be perceived as theft in some places, and its use would require alterations of technique and design to the traditional baskets they seek to preserve. Philanthropists could join with environmentalists to farm seagrass elsewhere, but this would require costly studies and land acquisition with no guaranteed outcome. Finally, highly motivated weavers could always become wayfarers and gather the stuff where it is still free and plentiful.

## CRAFT IN HISTORY

Wayfaring or nomadism connotes freedom, and we can identify therein an important nexus between history and craft. Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* grew from his fascination for the work of medieval masons who traveled across Europe building Gothic cathedrals. He admired the irregularity of their massive structures achieved by the ancient stone-cutting technique of squaring more favorably compared to the cookie-cutter templates later employed during the Renaissance. The masons constituted themselves as hermetic societies – mobile encampments of skilled artisans – who guarded trade secrets and practiced confraternal rites that eventually gave rise to charges of blasphemy by the fathers of the very churches they constructed. Deleuze and Guattari, followers like Ingold of Bergsonian processual philosophy, characterized this type of artisanry as a “nomad science.” Writing in a less pessimistic era they identified the principal obstacle to the exercise of craft in the State as purveyor of “royal science.”

*States have always had problems with journeyman's associations, or compagnonnages, the nomadic or itinerant bodies of the types formed by masons, carpenters, smiths, etc. Settling, sedentarized labor power, regulating the movement of the flow of labor, assigning it channels and conduits, forming corporations in the sense of organisms, and, for the rest, relying upon forced manpower recruited on the spot (corvée) or among indigents (charity workshops) – this has always been one of the principal affairs of the State, which undertook to conquer both a band vagabondage and a body nomadism.<sup>24</sup>*

States carve space into manageable units to better control populations and enforce social order.<sup>25</sup> They map and subdivide space into the alienable units according to the rules of private property, a process that leads eventually to the elimination or destruction of the commons upon which crafts previously thrived. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this administrated space as *striated space* as opposed to *smooth space* where unrestricted movement prevails. In a word, the State is antithetical to the spirit and practice of craftsmanship; by doing away with the notion of free space it promotes the monopolization of resources and constrains productive activities within new proprietary spaces. For the nascent capitalist state limitations placed upon the mobility of labor – the enclosure of the commons and confinement of tradesmen in workshops – were strategic to formation of a working class whose labor could be quantified through the magic of abstraction. To measure something, one must first to make it stationary, bind to a place. By reducing labor to time spent in the workshop, the state or its corporate agents can further homogenize the craftsman's labor by isolating his tools and knowledge as factors also quantifiable as a series of costs. The erosion of skills thus proceeds apace with the confiscation of tools, a process of transforming the workshop into a factory where all work gets quantified as monetary value, first by individual trade

and then by region, class, gender, nationality, etc. Because craft expresses mobile labor within *smooth space* (Ingold's taskscape), it must be tamed if not destroyed for the accumulation of wealth to proceed. The State and craft are mutually antagonistic.

Let us return to the example of Gothic architecture for a reminder of how extensively the journeymen traveled, building cathedrals near and far, scattering construction sites across the land, drawing on an active and passive power (mobility and the strike) that was far from convenient for the State. The State's response was to take over management of the construction sites, merging all the divisions of labor in the supreme distinction between the intellectual and the manual, the theoretical and the practical, modeled upon the difference between the "governors" and the "governed." In the nomad sciences, as in the royal sciences, we find the existence of a "plane," but not at all in the same way. The ground-level plane of the Gothic journeyman is opposed to the metric plane of the architect, which is on paper and off site. The plane of consistency or composition is opposed to another plane, that of formation. Stone cutting by squaring is opposed to stone cutting using templates, which implies the use of a model for reproduction. It can be said not only that there is no longer a need for skilled or qualified labor, but also that there is a need for unskilled or unqualified labor, for a dequalification of labor.<sup>26</sup>

The conquest of craft was a prelude to the cultivation of a modern, factory-ready proletariat. Their offensive proceeded on two fronts by driving a wedge between masters and journeymen and by transfiguring workshops under the supervision of master-cum-entrepreneurs. The first described the development of class differentiation from the 14th to 16th centuries and succeeded by barring a journeyman's route to mastership. "Various devices were contrived by the masters and through them by the government to place the mastership virtually beyond the reach of journeymen. ... Dues and entrance fees were increased and more costly gifts and banquets demanded of candidates for the mastership. The masterpiece, which the prospective master was obliged to furnish everywhere ... became a virtually prohibitive requirement, as it was made progressively more costly and difficult to achieve." Masters closed their shops to journeymen, expelled them from guilds, and lobbied the state to curtail their civil rights. Violence accompanied this persecution in Germany, France, and England and provoked a backlash by independent journeymen's associations who defended their status through benevolent societies and tactical alliances with small masters. Resistance to the subjugation of craft, indeed the responsibility for maintaining handicraft standards, came to reside eventually in the *compagnonnage* as a defense for the mobility of labor.<sup>27</sup>

The decline of craft was synonymous with the ostracizing of journeymen. Young and often unmarried journeymen were destined to roam far and wide in search of work. They soon banded together. "The picturesqueness of the journeymen's societies has tended to divert attention from their essential purpose. Primarily they were organs of workers' defense against nascent capitalism.

Through their hold over the travelling worker upon his arrival in town the societies could attempt to monopolize the placement of workers and to exercise an indirect control of the labor market. When their demands were refused, they sometimes withheld a supply of workers from the masters and sometimes even from the entire city. Similarly, those workmen were banned who disobeyed the orders of the group, failed to pay their assessments or agreed to work at bargain rates. The societies, in short, conducted an organized persecution of scabs. The masters found themselves at odds with the societies if they exceeded the number of apprentices authorized by the rules of the trade, thus diminishing the number of paid workmen, or if they reduced wages, nominal or in 'bread, meat, and drink'. ... A third object of protest on the part of the societies was the excessive length of the working day."

These conflicts frequently ended in strikes," including thirteenth century cloth workers in France and a sixteenth century printers strike that began in Lyon and spread to Paris. "These strikes had a strike fund and an almost military type of organization and the strike was punctuated with outbursts of violence. ... In general, government was at all times and in all places hostile to journeymen combinations.<sup>28</sup>

Riots, indicative of sharpening class conflict throughout this period, were met with vagrancy laws and new constabularies authorized to enforce them. For example, Britain's "poor laws" targeted vagabonds indiscriminately to preclude such rebellions by fostering a permanent state of itinerancy whereby unemployed journeymen got the right to tea, toast, and a bed for one night only at the local parish. Whereas the journeyman's mobility was previously a source of defensive power, the State redefined him as a vagabond by forcing him back onto the road the next morning in a tradition that survived into the early 20th century as graphically narrated by George Orwell in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. More significant than direct economic reform, the creation by fiat of a pariah class signaled a radical transformation of public morality and drew the attention of theologians and philosophers as the most striking characteristic of the new manufacturing age. None other than Adam Smith, it will be recalled, published *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as a prelude to his magnum opus describing the way modern nations accumulated wealth.

Vagabondage implied a downward spiral for craft by literally marginalizing unemployed artisans; the *compagnonnage*, once an essential rite of passage, came to define a suspect class of potential outlaws. Individual non-compliance or recalcitrant group behavior led directly to debtor's prisons or indentured service in Dickensian workhouses, the latter a degraded form of the workshop devoted to menial tasks yet increasingly disposed to the exploitation of women and girls in homespun crafts such as sewing and embroidery.<sup>29</sup>

The preservation of skills associated with textiles offers an example of the uneven transition from feudalism to capitalism in which handwork traditions continued as sources of value while the

conditions for their practice deteriorated steadily. Even artistic representations of craft like the stone carvers' workshop depicted in Nanni di Banco's 14th century frieze became increasingly rare as the esthetics of the early Florentine Renaissance switched focus from an appreciation of skilled artisans to the outright flattery of wealthy merchants and princes. Although guilds and workshops endured from Antiquity until the Industrial Revolution, their history is one of declining authority over space, losing their grasp over the rural commons as sources for raw materials, surrendering control of towns to merchants and bankers, and faltering in their ability to protect the taskscape as a secure route from apprenticeship to mastery.



It was Adam Smith's chief critic, Karl Marx, who emphasized the connections between the former's theory of morality and economics: the social relations underlying handicraft labor succumbed to the domination of capital long before technical innovations introduced machines geared for industrialized mass production. Under what Marx called the "formal subsumption" of labor to capitalist production, the masters substituted wages for commissions, regulated the distribution of tools and materials into their workshops, induced the rigors of time and spatial constraints, and finally exiled any redundant laborers into the void. Once these changes had taken hold the stage was set to transfigure the workshop into a new kind of space, the factory, built to accommodate experimental technology and new sources of energy. Powerful machines redefined the old craft-based standards of manufacturing while the State used its authority to secure the expanded reproduction of this new regime on a grand scale. This "real subsumption" of labor to capital signaled the death knell of craft. As Marx accurately predicted, it has become a global phenomenon.

To recapitulate the journeyman's historical dilemma, on the one hand, the *compagnonnage* originated with problems of a limited-growth feudal economy in which guilds regulated production to protect commerce within a princely domain. Manufacture for local consumption and very limited export defined the quality and quantity of commodities produced by a workshop. Since commissions were ordered and paid for by the prince, surplus commodities found no markets and could not be exchanged for money. Guild regulations were tantamount to laws governing each craft such that any violations would negatively affect the master's social status



and threaten him and his dependents' economic security. In most places, the tightly controlled production of even money itself – the design and minting of coin hence the importance of the goldsmith's craft – impeded financial speculation. On the other hand, the very same restrictions on the global quantity of manufactures guaranteed a sustainable equilibrium with the region's natural resources. In theory, feudal restrictions protected the environmental integrity of the commons for future generations with the guild functioning as an archaic switch regulating material exchanges between cities and the surrounding countryside. Moreover, the feudal patent on contents and standards of manufacture resulted in the codification of various craft traditions. Those regulations safeguarding a craft nurtured the image of the princely court as a symbol of perfection and arbiter of value in the eyes of its subjects. Finally, by pushing journeymen out of the workshop and onto the road, the guilds ensured social peace and with it the wayfaring spirit of craft, its allure as an avenue to freedom. A rather cruel freedom perhaps and certainly not the tacky libertarianism of a consumerist society, nonetheless an escape from confinement so dear to youth. A kindred wayfaring spirit informs the modern Diggers, Whole Earth Cataloguers, the followers of permaculture, and a small but dedicated cadre of neo-journeymen.<sup>30</sup>

Yet social peace and the concomitant environmental equilibrium were temporary and came at great expense to the entire system. The second phase of the Great Transformation began in cities between the 14th and 16th centuries where some master craftsmen aligned themselves with merchants to gradually expand production, first through the putting-out system and later by transfiguring their workshops into small scale factories where labor, tools, and raw materials were acquired on credit against the promise of accelerated production and increased profits. A fundamental process of social disruption thus relieved the master from his responsibility to feed and shelter apprentices and journeymen in the conventional way by taking them into his household. His moral and personal obligations dissolved into a new set of capitalistic relations based on the free exchange of labor.<sup>31</sup> By severing the quasi-familial bonds of the workshop the master craftsman-turned-entrepreneur could better compartmentalize the new technical division of labor and populate his factory with workers at descending levels of skill. If orders fell, he was free to kick them out; when business picked up he could find replacements or rehire those whom he had laid off. By eliminating apprentices and journeymen dependents from his domestic expenses, the master-turned-entrepreneur could apply the savings to investments in newer tools and, if necessary, relocate his factory closer to transportation hubs.

Whereas guilds had regulated their individual crafts and protected their markets, independent manufacturers contested and eventually undermined such restrictions. From the 15th century onwards, this disruption steadily challenged the guilds and sometimes overtook them from within by empowering advocates of change. Eventually, the disruptors rose to prominence in free cities throughout Western Europe and challenged the landed nobility and urban patriciate who, while

still retaining the ability to tax peasants, lost their exclusive power over town councils, courts, and even their sovereigns. The rising bourgeois class educated themselves in canon, civil, and inheritance law and advocated for new ordinances in the spirit of reform. Ownership, not only of land but also tools, raw materials, and skilled labor, eventually supplanted the old guild system.

By no means more than a rudimentary sketch, this four-century-long narrative of economic and social disruption outlines the transition from the feudal workshop to the capitalist factory. For Henri Pirenne, the guild system “was incompatible with the capitalist idea of profit-making.”<sup>32</sup> It had protected craft as a technique but strangled entrepreneurial creativity. For the unfortunate journeyman, the downfall of the guild system resulted in impoverishment by obliging him to surrender his tools and upon the pain of starvation accept the conditions of the capitalist factory. Effectively he was proletarianized.

For awhile production techniques remained the same but wages were now calculated by the amount time spent at the workbench. (Consider the parallel changes from the Yellow Taxis of the 20th century to Ubers of 21st.) This new definition of labor as a function of time, its abstraction, was fundamental to the genesis of the capitalist commodity whose value could be henceforth determined not only by the skill expended in shaping it into a useful object but also according to the relative equivalency of the labor-time invested in it. If its use-value was unique, then its exchange value could now be mathematically derived as a relation of exchange-value to all other commodities.

# TRANSITION TO A NEW GLOBAL WORKSHOP

**M**onty Python's 1983 movie "The Meaning of Life" produced by Beatle George Harrison's Handmade Films, Inc. begins with a ten-minute prologue, a comic parable about financial piracy on the high seas. Entitled "[The Crimson Permanent Assurance](#)" the skit opens with an establishing shot: a 19th century Victorian building in London's financial center whose limestone exterior has been prepped for renovation, a protective shroud over the scaffolding flutters in the breeze. A dramatic voiceover narrates the tale of mutiny by a cohort of aging, grayhead clerks seemingly chained like galleon slaves to their desks at a hopelessly stodgy insurance company.

*In the bleak days of 1983 when England languished in the doldrums of a ruinous monetarist policy, the good, loyal men of the Permanent Assurance Company, a once-proud family firm recently fallen on hard times, strained under the yoke of their oppressive new corporate management ...*

The long-suffering clerks fashion their office hardware into weapons and force a young bespoke-suited executive, delegated by their new corporate overlords, to "walk the plank" out the office window while sealing his colleagues inside a bank vault. Having seized control of the company the clerks rip their threadbare office attire into pirate's rags. Outside, gathering winds billow the exterior shroud into a mullioned spinnaker sail that loosens the building from its foundations. Breaking away from the City the "reasonably violent" old crew steers the "ship" across the Atlantic" to Wall Street where it attacks and pillages "The Big Corporation of America." Boisterously singing the "Accountancy Shanty" the pirates navigate the dangerous "shoals of bankruptcy" and sail forth to raid other great citadels of global capitalist finance, each "crumbling to the might of their business acumen" until finally the "ship" plunges off the edge of a flat earth.

Understood as a metaphor for the cutthroat tactics of private equity billionaires, this parody offers up an image of the corporate id as a fantasy unbound by regulations and civility or even the laws of science. Thirty years later it became reality, albeit metamorphosed into 827 miles of fiber-optic cable unobstructed by political or geographical irregularities and buried underground in a straight line between Chicago and Mahwah, New Jersey. The Spread Network, as it is called, reduced the round-trip travel time of an electronically executed financial transaction to a mere 13 milliseconds between two privately owned stock exchanges. Its success guaranteed the rise of virtual trading by "quants," a new generation of buccaneers armed with mathematical formulas devised to take advantage of the infinitesimally small time lags separating the execution and consummation of millions of trades. Billions were taken in profits by the underwriters and subscribers at these exchanges, and as surely as the "Permanent Assurance" pirates fell into

oblivion by ignoring risk, the quants piloted global financial markets toward an apocalyptic crash on May 6, 2010.<sup>33</sup>

## HOW DO THESE SCENARIOS RELATE TO CRAFT?

**B**oth examples reveal the inner dynamics of capital and offer a summary view of the global workshop where all labor, craft inclusive, now occurs. In the first instance, the pirates assail foreign markets to salvage their own skins in a classic illustration of the spatial fix, a term coined by Marxist geographer David Harvey to characterize the accumulation of capital by dispossession. Having exhausted the sources of profit in their home territory, the captains of industry (and finance) replenish their capital by plundering abroad. The technology employed is archaic but lethal – free-roaming privateers, armed in this case with ballistic firing cabinets instead of cannonball artillery. The only innovation here is an imperial strategy to extend the web of domination to all four corners of a presumably flat earth; there is no “fundamental modification of the real nature of the labor process ... capital subsumes the labor process as it finds it... [taking] over an existing labor process, developed by different and more archaic modes of production ... for example, handicraft, a mode of agriculture corresponding to a small, independent peasant economy.”<sup>34</sup> Here Marx describes the formal subsumption of labor under capital where the only changes are the intensification of traditional activities in the form of longer hours and an increased pace of work. The flat earth offers minimal resistance to the expansion of capital and its exploitative social relations. There are neither regulations, nor traffic lanes, nor stop signs on the open seas; passports and visas are not required because this smooth space belongs to no state, yielding only to the machinic unconscious of a marauding armada. Think Commodore Matthew Perry’s mid-nineteenth century gunboat diplomacy trained on Japanese ports and the resulting silk trade.

In the second instance, we encounter a new form of accumulation using microprocessors, fiber-optic communications, and computational statistics to squeeze profits from space-time dimensions beyond the realm of normal human faculties. The Spread Network engineers overcame all physical obstacles by excavating and burying their cable along “the straightest path allowed by law” to create smooth space ex-nihilo. Not unlike fracking, which exploits underground geological formations to yield natural gas and shale oil, the Spread Network fundamentally changes the process of capital accumulation. By trenching beneath the earth to facilitate accumulation at nearly the speed of light the network becomes a matrix for previously inconceivable methods of massive profit-taking. The real subsumption of labor under capital demolishes the physical barriers to production exemplified here by the manipulation of time-space dimensions to consolidate thousands of workshops under a regimen of virtual management. Orders for specific commodities, supply chains for their component parts, and depreciation costs fluctuate from moment to moment. A hundred workshops lose their orders for every ten automated ones coming online; local management yields all decision-making power to a faceless centralized authority;

contracts, work rules, and occupational definitions are regularly abrogated with resulting litigation rationalized as a transactional fee; rents are destabilized; properties rezoned or demolished overnight; and finally, salaries are terminated suddenly and without warning. Debt, personal and institutional, is the only certainty one can expect from this transfigured workshop.

Trades along the Spread Network are fueled almost exclusively by the systematic reproduction of debt, securitized and marketed to speculators who auction contracts that give the buyer access to revenue streams from annualized interest payments extending decades into the future. Securities keyed to these contracts (CDO's or collateralized debt obligations) become vehicles for secondary speculation as wagers on the probability of default relative to interest rates. In this virtual casino speculators call the game; akin in popularity to blackjack, short-selling is a favorite one where the winners profit from failure and declining values. Another type of contract, the credit default swap, insures against losses to counter-claimants in the event of defaults. At this level bets can be placed on almost any kind of financial transaction from corporate buyouts to foreign exchange rates, hence the term *derivatives* to describe the trillions worth of contracts with point spreads no greater than pennies and mills funneling profits to an international club of oligarchs who command the global workshop.



"Trade Winds" restored by Rockport Marine

## CONCLUSION: ON THE SUSTAINABILITY OF CRAFT

**W**e now return to the analog workshops and their young artisans eagerly anticipating orders by newly anointed “unicorns.” As recently reported in the *Financial Times*,

*Industry figures see the decision by the two unnamed young technology billionaires to buy superyachts as significant because in recent years the high end of the market has been dominated by Russian oligarchs, Middle Eastern royalty and, before that, Silicon Valley titans such as Paul Allen and Larry Ellison. If more founders of the current crop of tech unicorns follow recent buyers, it could be good news for yachtmakers.*<sup>35</sup>

Traditionally located in Europe and North America and now China too, yacht-builders appear to be crafting the ultimate status symbol. According to a British yacht company executive, quoted in the same article, “Our product is a 100 per cent discretionary purchase. People don’t need luxury yachts, they want them.” Yet parsing the difference between *need* and *want*, the same article later informs the reader about not only France’s attempts to police the use of yachts as “floating tax havens” but also the EU’s growing intolerance for the “secretive ownership structures employed by wealthy yacht owners.”<sup>36</sup>

In other words, something other than idle leisure is inherent to luxury yachting. The fledgling Chinese boat building industry caters to its national elite who spare no expense in pursuit of “face” as essential to the conduct of their business ventures. The sumptuously equipped yachts exist principally for entertainment or splashy inducements for wrangling contracts and less savory arrangements, this purpose seemingly confirmed by the fact that a recent decline in sales was associated not with an economic downturn rather an internal purge of Communist Party cadres. As a result, some yachtsmen are scurrying to other shipyards in the Pacific or, wealth permitting, even the Mediterranean. One Chinese yacht-builder laments the failure of his government to sanction luxury boat ownership as a “middle class thing” unaware ironically of the limits the state places on freedom of movement by restricting to twelve the number of passengers including crew on a single yacht.<sup>37</sup>

Authoritarian China and the democratic European Union share precisely the same apprehensions lest their seafaring business moguls exercise too much freedom deal-making, money-laundering, and tax-sheltering beyond the limits of state control and surveillance. The fate of Monty Python’s Permanent Assurance raiders was reserved for flat-earthers and acolytes of other dumb notions like social justice or civic morality. Genuine corporate privateers, however,

sail to latitudes known only to their captains and the helicopter pilots who deliver provisions, cash, prostitutes, attorneys, bankers, clients, family, and hangers-on. For business to operate offshore is to declare independence from government oversight and reinstate the antediluvian ideal of accumulation so conceived by ideologues like Hayek as capitalism unchained. The impulse to police these movements has everything to do with establishing limits to the appropriation of free space. In their respective cases China and Europe are seeking to extend jurisdiction over an expanse beyond their reach, that is Ingold's taskscape for unobstructed entrepreneurialism and Deleuze and Guattari's smooth space where the machinic unconsciousness of a marauding horde ruthlessly hoists booty onto its polished mahogany decks.

Shoppers can choose from hundreds of miniature replicas from the golden era proudly displayed at the New York Yacht Club whose extensive archives contain their blueprints and specifications. Alternatively, one can hire a marine architect or simply opt for a production model. Beginners can custom order a contemporary racing sloop with wooden hull, teak-over-plywood deck, a cherry-trimmed interior, and laminated teak wheel from Rockport Marine, a Maine shipyard employing 50 crafts people, "driven to build, restore, and maintain wooden boats to the highest standards." Every component is made on-site including metal winches and rigging. A 10-meter W-class boat is meant for day-trips and regattas but as the length of the vessel doubles or triples so does the range of its autonomy. For example, the 294-foot Athena, is a three-mast schooner with five cabins to accommodate 15 passengers and crew. Equipped with a 2000 HP inboard diesel engine, a 28,000-gallon fuel tank, and 7,000 gallons of fresh water tank, this superyacht can ply the world's oceans for weeks at a time. Built by Royal Huisman shipyards of Holland and Ogunquit, Maine the Athena is currently on offer from Merle Woods & Associates, premiere yacht brokers in Fort Lauderdale, Florida to qualified buyers for \$45,000,000 with a prominent disclaimer: NOT FOR SALE OR CHARTER TO US RESIDENTS WHILE IN US WATERS.<sup>38</sup>

Offshore coordinates are best for evading surveillance and fiscal controls, but extraordinary opulence defines almost any space chosen for inking massive deals. The Metropolitan Club on Fifth Avenue was modeled on the Palazzo Pandolfini designed by Rafael in the 16th century and long considered the most beautiful example of Late Renaissance architecture in Florence. Built by the renown architects McKim, Mead and White, it was a showcase of craftsmanship from marbled Palladian archways, intricate wrought iron balustrades, mosaics, and colorful tiles to the finest stained glass windows by Tiffany, Armstrong and Millard, hand carved wooden escutcheons, Rödel clocks, and decorative friezes.<sup>39</sup> In late spring 1901 the nation's robber barons, their bankers and attorneys gathered in the club's second-floor library to hammer out an agreement to create the first billion-dollar railroad monopoly. Although party to the contract, J. Pierpont Morgan was absent, having boarded his yacht, the *Corsair*, bound for Europe where his agents competed with



Old World aristocrats at auctions of prized artworks and objects by the Greek and Roman artisans of classical antiquity. These purchases adorned Morgan's Madison Avenue home, scene of another summit behind locked doors in 1907 when he orchestrated the biggest international transfer of gold bullion in banking history.

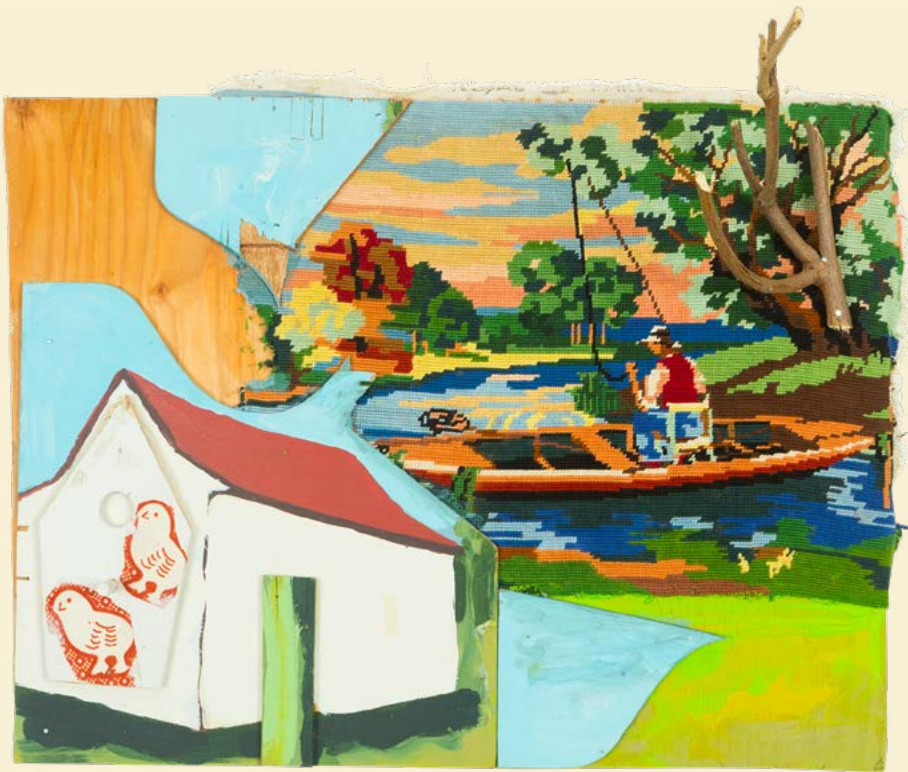
One-hundred-ten years later, the stone carver's lament – "I was confident that if I hit a homerun for them [Robert A. M. Stern Architects], they would recognize the value and be back for more" – testifies to the barely improved lot of craftsmen. "It is worth noting," he continues, "that the craft of stone carving is in a much more profound state of decline than any of the other great craft traditions. Is it possible to find an established school of traditional stone carving analogous to the boat building school? I am not aware of one. Considering that carved stone has been the medium chosen by humankind to create permanent monuments to its highest ideals since prehistoric times, that situation cries out to be rectified."

The oligarchs have not yet dared cast themselves in stone monuments or acquired sufficient appreciation of design to commission impregnable fortresses. They are still too busy fracking the remains of unspoiled nature and by this pursuit therefore allergic to any structures likely to be demolished to suit the next ground-lease tenant. This might be good news if not for compliant governments, unable and unwilling to renew their institutional core by building permanent democratic spaces – public forums, roads, stations, baths, schools, hospitals, parks, universities, museums, theaters – where stone carving and the other crafts under review herein might survive and flourish. When these spaces are *really* subsumed under the commodity form of capital, there is nowhere left for craft except in privileged workshops or deeply embedded in domestic homespun.

Skilled labor continues to perpetuate itself in the former although it rarely deviates from a taskscape predetermined by market forces. Appearing as an independent workshop, it is likely the subsidiary of a big corporation or bank in the same way that 90% of craft beers worldwide are owned by three or four companies.<sup>40</sup> However, the truly insidious aspect of this neo-craft revival is not the glossy advertising directed at potential buyers, who are present at any rate, rather the fantasies employed to motivate the worker's investment in standards of excellence such that his or her imagination is merely a projection of the elite's unrestricted freedom of navigation. It certainly helps to overcome a sense of alienation by apostrophizing the yacht, one's own creation propelled by the trade winds toward exotic ports. The potential here that makes a philanthropic endeavor worthwhile is the anticipation of the spark that will lead the journeyman to rediscover the historical meaning of craft in an association of free tradesmen who can empower themselves to disrupt the disrupters.

In domestic workshops – quilting circles, hand looms, dyers, weavers, blacksmiths, bookbinders, luthiers, and furniture makers – we encounter the dynamism of independent

handicrafts that can subsist untethered from the market. This explains the recent popularity of studio craft in a world where homes lack real walls (likewise they are *really* subsumed under capital) and are continuously infiltrated by the market-bearing media. Deeper into the small communities of crypto-crafters who informally transmit technique and culture from one generation to the next homespun survives as the expression of unquantifiable industriousness. It is useful work but redolent equally of the pleasure, sociability, and tranquility often found in solitude. More prosaically known as petty commodity production, homespun is rooted in the earliest human settlements and their diverse cultural traditions. Resistant to many historical and social transformations, it was the productive backbone of Classical Antiquity, African kingdoms, and Asian empires. It resurfaced during critical periods of feudalism and hid in interstices of monopoly capitalism and state socialism. Surviving the depredations of slavery, it is the very definition of all that is resilient in our nature.



Jolie Stahl, "Homespun," mixed media, 2016

# NOTES

1. Kathryn Marie Dudley, *Guitar Makers*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). ([return to page 2](#))
2. Jonathan Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process*, (London: Sage Publications, 1994), 146-66. ([return to page 10](#))
3. “‘Living Treasure’ Helped to Revive Kapa-Making,” *Honolulu Star-Advertiser* (5 November 2014). ([return to page 11](#))
4. Vrest Norton, *The Forgotten Art of Building a Good Fireplace*, (Dublin, NH: Yankee, 1969). ([return to page 14](#))
5. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Félix Guattari, *The Machinic Unconscious*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011). ([return to page 20](#))
6. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 116-17. ([return to page 20](#))
7. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun*, (New York: Knopf, 2001), 138-41. ([return to page 21](#))
8. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 80. ([return to page 22](#))
9. *Ibid.*, 165. ([return to page 23](#))
10. *Ibid.*, 114. ([return to page 23](#))
11. *Ibid.*, 266. ([return to page 23](#))
12. *Ibid.*, 288. ([return to page 23](#))
13. Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2015), 191. ([return to page 23](#))
14. *Ibid.* ([return to page 24](#))
15. Brittany Bronson, “Why Waiters Drink. And Why It Matters,” *New York Times*, 21 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/opinion/why-waiters-drink-and-why-it-matters.html>. ([return to page 24](#))
16. George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1961). In 1977 on his first day as a journeyman cook at Le Montagnard, 24 rue des Cannelles in the ultra-chic 6th arrondissement of Paris the present author met Ben Jamaa Boische, the restaurant’s dishwasher, who described himself as *le plus ancien de la maison* because his employment there antedated the current ownership. Smiling, he pointed around the kitchen and announced, “*Je fais parti du bail*,” literally, “I come with the lease.” ([return to page 24](#))
17. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 263. ([return to page 25](#))
18. *Ibid.*, 59. ([return to page 25](#))
19. Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2015) ([return to page 26](#))
20. “Maine museum preserves Native American birch canoe from 1700s,” *New York Daily News*, 2 September 2017, <https://www.nydailynews.com/amp/news/national/maine-museum-preserves-native-american-canoe-1700s-article-1.3463418> ([return to page 27](#))
21. John McPhee, “The Survival of the Birch Bark Canoe,” *The Journal of Modern Craft*, 10:1, March 2017, 77-90. ([return to page 27](#))
22. Tim Ingold, *Being Alive*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 59. ([return to page 27](#))
23. *Ibid.*, 178. ([return to page 27](#))
24. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a *thousand plateaus*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 368. ([return to page 29](#))

25. Management of these units is the historical, concrete mission of statecraft for Sennett. Looking at the relations among these units, Foucault concluded that such management generates specific forms of power and hierarchy, referred to respectively as *biopower* and *biopolitics*. ([return to page 29](#))
26. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *a thousand plateaus*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 368. ([return to page 30](#))
27. Henri Hauser, "Journeymen's Societies" in Edwin R. A. Seligman and Alvin Saunders Johnson. *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Volume 8, (New York: Macmillan Co, 1930), 425. ([return to page 30](#))
28. Ibid., 426. ([return to page 31](#))
29. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun*, (New York: Knopf, 2001), 144-5. ([return to page 31](#))
30. Melissa Eddy, "Europe's Journeymen Keep the Past Alive," *New York Times*, 8 August 2017, A6. ([return to page 33](#))
31. This abridged synopsis ignores the debate concerning the origins of the exchange economy. One thesis emphasizes the role of foreign merchant capital whereas the antithesis supposes the internal transformation of peasant obligations from rent in-kind to money-rent. Neither argument disputes the effects of money on eroding traditional relations within the workshop, only the agents of this process. See Kohachiro Takahashi's "Contribution," in Paul Sweezy, Maurice Dobb, et al., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 1976), 87-97. ([return to page 33](#))
32. Henri Pirenne, "Guilds," in Seligman, Edwin R. A. and Alvin Saunders Johnson. *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, New York: Macmillan Co, 1930, 7:213. ([return to page 34](#))
33. Michael Lewis, *Flash Boys*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), 22; U.S. Commodity Futures Trading Commission and U.S. Securities & Exchange Commission, *Findings Regarding the Market Events of May 6, 2010*, (Washington 2010). ([return to page 36](#))
34. Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, (London: Penguin, 1976), 1021. ([return to page 37](#))
35. "American Yacht Buyers Underpin Strengthening Order Books," *Financial Times*, 27 September 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/42357948-6ac8-11e7-b9c7-15af748b60d0> ([return to page 39](#))
36. Ibid. ([return to page 39](#))
37. "China's Yacht Manufacturers Look Abroad to Fill Gap in Sales," *Financial Times*, 27 September 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/3934e482-6ac8-11e7-b9c7-15af748b60d0>. ([return to page 39](#))
38. <http://www.yachtworld.com/boats/2004/Royal-Huisman--2958699/NEWPORT/RI/United-States#.WekFclpry-4> ([return to page 40](#))
39. Paul Porzelt, *The Metropolitan Club of New York*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1982). ([return to page 40](#))
40. Nick Wells and Mark Fahey, "All the beer you drink is owned by one company," *CNBC*, 13 October 2015, <https://www.cnbc.com/2015/10/13/all-the-beer-you-drink-is-owned-by-one-company.html>. ([return to page 41](#))