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Does Art Benefit from Craft Knowledge?

This essay is based on Peter Dormer's book "The Art of The Maker: Skill and its Meaning in Art, Craft and Design" and Harry Rand's book "Hundertwasser". It places Dormer and Hundertwasser in the discussion of the role of practical or craft knowledge in the art world. This essay suggests that it is very important for the artist to acquire self-experience of actually doing or making, as it cannot be articulated in words.

Peter Dormer (1949–1996) was a journalist and well-known British author specializing in contemporary visual arts, applied art, design and architecture. The main thesis of Dormer in this discussion is that craft knowledge enriches individual experience and becomes a part of the self. It is this knowledge that is expressed in art. Therefore, art benefits from it.

Hundertwasser (1928–2000) was Austrian painter, sculptor, architect, and ecologist. His art can be regarded as genuine alternative to the blankness of so much modern art. In his work it is the object itself that is most excellent, not its implications. Instead of providing theory, he prefers exploring the realm of the senses. Hundertwasser's works in architecture, which he claimed are rooted in the Law of Nature, reflect his consistency living harmony with nature.

Craft knowledge

In Dormer's view, knowledge can be fundamentally divided into two main groups: first, knowledge that can be described in words, and the other, knowledge that can only be shown. We usually call the previous one as theoretical knowledge, and the late as practical knowledge. This Dormer's idea is based on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, a Western philosopher of the twentieth century, which in 1918 argued that the fundamental problem in philosophy in fact lies in the difference between what can be expressed theoretically in proposition –language- and what cannot be expressed theoretically but only shown.

The first one, theoretical knowledge, uses language for analyzing our inquiries in the world and then reflecting what invention or discovery we possibly achieve. Definitely, in language we get a power to build a conceptual thought.

The second one, practical knowledge, such as craft knowledge, puts ‘making’ or ‘doing’ as its central activity. It is all about work related to tacit knowledge and connoisseurship; knowledge that cannot be described very easily in language but often can be demonstrated through example and comparison. It is harder learnt through books, than face-to-face with a skilled practitioner and teacher. Tacit knowledge can be achieved mostly through experience of doing a variety of work, as Dormer illustrates:

“The particular ‘touch’ of a violinist, pianist, draughtsman, surgeon, nurse or vet cannot be described, but it can be demonstrated and, to a degree, be imitated or even learned wholly by someone else.” (Dormer 1994, 14)

Essentially similar to tacit knowledge, connoisseurship is such a knowledge that can be achieved through experience of senses. Certainly, connoisseurship is exceptionally valuable, since it is broadly useful, for instance, of tasting foods and wine, of art attribution, and diagnosing problems as well.

Dormer describes that in our everyday life, it is quite obvious that the concept alone is not enough; in order to get thing done, we need also to make a practical and physical effort. Writing, talking, or reflecting about the action are not the same things as the action itself, nor do they provide much insight into how it feels to act, and to know for one self how to act. Accordingly, the knowledge required to make something work is not the same as understanding the principle behind it. For example, the Laws of Thermodynamics theoretical knowledge, as Dormer argues, cannot tell you how to build a single engine. To build an engine, besides entails theoretical knowledge, it requires also the practical knowledge of the engineer and the machinist, which is complex; much of it resists explanation in mathematical or logical languages, or in words, in general.

Because it happens in every individual, in one self in a sense of singularity, practical or craft knowledge is sometimes called as a ‘local’ knowledge, as distinct from general knowledge. Let take example in visual arts. General knowledge is an information that provides us a basic theory of color that tells, for example, when mixing blue and yellow, we will get green color, and similarly, by mixing black and white to get gray color. Thus, local knowledge is our own talent to arrange all those colors on the canvas as a painting, as a ‘piece of art’. Such local knowledge

is only achieved as one self's experience, in a single person: it particularly happens only in somebody –him self, in his existence; so it cannot be universal.

The ability to rely on knowledge of color, tone, devices illusion, and also to know how material will behave, is a key for bringing about the artist's goal. The more craft knowledge the artist has the more she or he can tackle pictorial problems that appear as s/he moves towards her/his goal. For Dormer, craft knowledge not only enables us to achieve our goal, it also enables us to imagine what our goal might look like. It helps us visualizing the goal in the first place and exploring the subject with full confidence in searching the right solution (Dormer 1994, 19-20).

Being singular, you are completely as you. Being an artist, the more singular you are, the more particular/distinct your work is achieved. Hundertwasser expresses how importance singularity, as an asset of creativity of every individual. Every singular person is particularly unique. People are very different from one another, as they are already different at birth. For him, every one can and must creative, and that is a law of nature: what matter is what you are and what you make your self.

In extreme, Hundertwasser believes that even every human's 'name' reflects much of the self. Therefore, like a king who crowns him self, everyone should name him/her self, as Hundertwasser did also for him self: his current name *Friedensreich Regentag Dunkelbunt Hundertwasser* (means Rich in peace, Rainy day, Dark-colorful, Hundred waters) is not his original name; it was renewed from his given name Friedrich Stowasser. For him, as long as someone keeps the name that is given, he or she is not able to be him/her self, thus will never be an independent personality. "Your name is your label" and it is very specific, corresponds to you, and expresses your self, your identity.

Peter Dormer: the decline of craft skills in Contemporary Arts

Today it is hard to find a specialist who holds large skills that can be broadly implemented in visual arts. Many contemporary artists move from one discipline to another but without gaining much of knowledge and skill that once distinguished such disciplines. The tendency is, most artists today produce more fast-instant results, as fast as the rapid change in society.

So, the role of craft knowledge has decreased in plastic arts, as Dormer believes, because it seems to have no fundamental value. What Dormer means with plastic arts is painting, sculpture, and studio craft whose content is substantially dependent on practical skill, and whose intention is discovered through the process of making the object (Dormer 1994, 7).

To deal with that issue, Dormer takes figure Henry Matisse to be worthy considered. During his career Matisse has studied various field of arts taught by different artists, which later he appeared to have discovered impressionism. He has also acquired various skills, such as etching, dry point, lithography, and book illustration. Considering his background of those various activities, the painting and sculpture works of Matisse reflect the result of craft knowledge: the harmonious interconnection of the thinking and making.

Dormer sees that the art student of today –without the wide competence in craft knowledge as Matisse had as a student- tends to avoid all the work that shapes Matisse’s last works, but simply studying the art of creating semi-abstract paper cut-outs. Thus, by constructing that small base, the student tries to develop her/his own art. This is then the problem. Dormer argues that to get closely to Matisse’s achievement requires practical knowledge, which is achieved not only by looking at Matisse’s work, but the student must ‘do’ as well as. In other words, just to imitate late Matisse does not mean to grasp Matisse knowledge.

The lesson is: to learn and to become expert in craft or any other discipline, one need to go ‘native’, meaning that it is only learned by actually doing the activity. One cannot understand it or know it until one can do it. Here, self-experience plays undoubtedly a big role.

Dormer also notes that craft or tacit knowledge in the plastic arts has significantly declined due to the misconception that craft or tacit knowledge can be learnt easily enough if needed, as if craft knowledge can be taken down from a supermarket shelf. Therefore preservation and development efforts for teaching craft knowledge receive only little attention. Moreover, the development of reductionist abstract art, installation, performance and other non-traditional and non-craft based media, seems to contribute to the problem. Craft knowledge has become marginal in the shadows of Minimalist, Conceptualism, and Abstract Expressionism, whose work reduces the static and ‘too-slow’ traditional art forms, that do not suite anymore with artist’s living atmosphere. The expansion of fine arts into performance, installation and video art is understandable as reactions to the nature of consumer, media oriented society.

Since television and video can show complete mini-dramas in less than a minute, such ‘quick’ forms of art are suitable strategies for artists to express a political, cultural, moral, or skeptical comment to contemporary culture and society. The advantage of installation, video and performance for contemporary artists, which mostly have little handicraft training, is that those works can be made without specialist knowledge. For example, video camera, as Dormer expresses, is designed as an idiot-proof, ‘point and shoot’ tool for the mass consumer market.

So, the plastic arts have escaped from handicraft because craft knowledge is difficult to learn. It also takes too much time to gain for contemporary student or artist who willing to establish a personal style quickly in countering a rapid change art world. This demand of having thing done quickly brings a consequence. Artists often experience two conflicting emotions and demands. In one side they search for originality, and in the other side they have to create ‘meaningful’ art, in other words, the style should be ‘meaningful to the art world’.

Hundertwasser: style and process of producing art

Contrary to the contemporary mainstream, Hundertwasser does not see that having recognized style is the most important for an artist. For him, a style does not mean anything, as it is only an empty tool to express your self. Therefore a true artist has no style. The main aim of the artist is to develop his/her own unique individual creativity, rather than trying to fit into any existing ‘general’ style. So the work will be named later on.

Concerning to the process of producing art, he has suggested the importance of avoiding ready-made-instant things. He made most material him self for his paintings. For him, materials play an important role in the choice of media. With ready-made materials we cannot work well because it is like a dead material. It loses creativity since it is manufactured by somebody else or by machine.

Hundertwasser believes when he makes the materials him self, he is there from the start. For this argument he gives a metaphor: “You cannot adopt a child when it is twenty-five years old. You can adopt a child when it is three years old, or when it is a baby” By doing this we can step into the creative process any time. This process, whether it is preparing or manufacturing materials, is very important for the artist, because it is the starting point. Following is part of his comment on ready-made behavior in art:

“Many things are wrong in modern art because it is ready-made. The conceptions are ready-made because the artist copies from what is modern and what is “in” today and what is fashionable today. I try to step back as far as possible and put my self into the process as early as possible”. (Rand 1991, 92)

Many artists tend to avoid too much work of acquiring practical-local knowledge, because such process is likely too slow -so it is not suite anymore with the contemporary life style. Nowadays, rapid growing of science of technology has increased the speed of human lives. We produce and consume more goods in a more high acceleration. We demand more immediate new results, as well as dispose the out-of-dated more quickly. As the speed of change from the out-dated to the

new rapidly increases, it is hard for most people to keep up-to-date their life. Consequently, as Bezerra and Brasell-Jones (2005) notes, such a condition has produced high degree of anxiety due to the fact that human ability is very limited to cope with such changes.

According to Hundertwasser, artists should not amplify what is sick in the society, thus follow the speed-rhythm or mainstream in the society. Life is increasingly so hectic, but not for making art. But, what does the work of art gain by being done slowly?

To respond to that question, Hundertwasser -who believes in the Law of Nature- argues that by being done slowly work of art gains time. He sees his painting is totally different because it is vegetative painting. It develops quite slowly and steadily, and unfortunately, that does not suite our social order –people want immediate results, achieved through exploitation. From Hundertwasser’s view, the help of time is incredible in art:

“Something grows; then it can’t fail. Only the quick things fail because they don’t have the mark of evolution, the mark of age. Slow-growing trees are better than fast growing, the wood is better, they look better. Creation takes time and art, which does not involve evolution, is going to disappear quickly”. (Rand 1994,120)

As nature never in hectic, so human not suppose to be. Old wisdoms have taught us, mastering some practical knowledge requires time and patience. It cannot be achieved from mere instant process; instead, it grows step-by-step, time-by-time to reach its perfection: just like a big-elegant maple tree that has grown from a very small size of seed.

Art: the work or words?

Commenting the condition of professional art world, both Hundertwasser and Dormer for some points seems to have similarity. Dormer sees the contemporary art world appears to suggest that you can say that “I am an artist” and “This is art” if I say so; then you are an artist. The same case, Hundertwasser mentions “You can very well take a ready-made thing and declare it is a piece of art -you can take a chair or a urinal, as did Marcel Duchamp and others – sign it and have a piece of art” (Rand 1994, 92). Art is then whatever you say is art; explain in words.

Since wordy meanings of object is more important than the object it self, it is then quite obvious if craft knowledge continuously declines in the plastic art and contemporary art world in general.

Besides difficult and too slow to learn, as discussed previously, one of the strong arguments why most contemporary artists downgrade craft knowledge for their work is because the craft blocks

creativity, considering that in craft one must follow certain rules in its activity. Producing a work of art is a creative-free activity; therefore to follow rules will only result in limitation of freedom and output. But, do expert artists follow rules? By using Wittgenstein's and H. L. Dreyfus's thinking, Dormer shows that artists who already become experts do not use rules. Actually, rules are only for beginners, not experts. Asking experts about strict rules is the same as to put them back to the beginner's stage and pose him to state the rules he remembers but no longer uses.

An expert artist works with spontaneity, fluency, freedom and certainty, whose capacity is resulted from the accumulation of experience of tens of thousands of actual cases, which ordinary people or the beginners do not have.

The question is: how with those who less expert, who have lack of craft skill; those who want to create richly art but want to do it without the craft? From Dormer's view, they generally dismiss the craft element as 'sterile and rule-bound' and claim their work as more expressive and freer. Additionally, the wordy conception is produced to back up the meaning of their art work, and to give theoretical ground for their rejection of the craft as well. This is likely part of the twentieth century ways where intellectuals believe that they can bypass the work and go directly to the level of spontaneity without the need of practicing tens of thousands' experiences as Matisse or Picasso did.

In many cases, artists replace drawing and painting with words to compensate their incapability in acquiring craft knowledge. We more often find that words are more important than the work itself, as the slogan of Socrates: 'If you can't explain it, you don't understand it'. But Dreyfus has revised the statement in other way: 'Anyone who thinks he can carefully explain his skill, does not have expert understanding'.

After all, the expressiveness in the art work reflects mainly on the object of art itself, not in its wordy conception. As Dormer argues: "The essence of expression cannot be caught in words – what the representation 'means' is in the craft, not what is said about it" and also "The craft of still life painting is immensely rich: it is a language of its own, independent of the language of words" (Dormer 1994, 35). Therefore, the moral principle of expertise in craft is to show that 'we are what we know', because we do it. The more close we know the matter, the less words needed.

Self-experience is the key

In singularity, inner-experience is the most important, as experience is the only authority in human being. The philosophical base of that statement is: in order to understand something well

one has to try doing it, experience it with involving various senses he has: touch, smell, watch, taste, feel, and hear. By continuing doing and exploring thing, one obtains valuable resource of experience and memories – which capabilities contribute to the self-fulfillment of the artist.

Humans' perceptions are developed by involving them-selves actively with the world through practical and exploratory medium. Accordingly, the achievement of tacit knowledge is an extension of one's self. To know thing tacitly one has to go 'native' in that knowledge, intellectually and physically. The essence of nativity is be just your self –as the only single person. Dormer notes: “To know a craft the individual has to make craft knowledge his or her own so that thinking and doing flow together” (Dormer 1994, 100).

Nowadays computerization may replace the role of human craft skill. The main idea of computerized technology is in a way to provide the effect of other people's skill to an individual without that individual having to acquire them. Automatic videos and cameras, for example, have freed the unskilled user for doing self-experience and having knowledge dealing with light, exposure, speed, or focusing. The smart machine does the entire task accurately: 'you press the button and we do the rest'.

But, man-made skill is different with machine-made skill. Tim Ingold (2000, 5) in his book “The Perception of the Environment –Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill” describes human's skill as the capabilities of action and perception of the whole organic human being –that indissolubly mind and body- situated in richly structured environment. From Ingold's view, skills are not passed on through generations, but are re-grown in each generation, integrated with the way of the developing human organism, via training and experience in the performance of particular tasks. According to Ingold, skill is not just technical, since it is a result from the inseparable of mind and body –thinking and doing. Moreover, experience in human being, as Dormer argues, is complex. It involves physical and emotional sensation, intellectual apprehension, moral, and aesthetic value judgments as well. All of these are individually gained knowledge, which none implies to contemporary 'intelligent' machine.

Most professional photographers blame such technology in the camera because it refuses them to access to their own memories and dulling their perception. In principle, this 'automatization' will reduce the uniqueness of humans' capacities and craft skill into general level. And such a condition is worse especially for the art world. As Hundertwasser notes, using ready-made things will arrest one's creativity, as one cannot step into the creative process anytime. With ready-made things, part of the process is missing. This missing experience of creative process is unfortunate for the artist, because it is the starting point.

In the end, stressing the value of craft skill, Dormer notes: “What is especially valuable about craft is that once it is possessed by the individual it cannot be taken away and becomes a massive addition to the individual’s life” (Dormer 1994,103). So the future of handicraft technology will depend on whether people wish to be passive in the world of experience by letting their skill on the hands of other people or they want to acquire their experiences and knowledge by themselves.

However, ‘The world is my world’, as Wittgenstein says. All knowledge and experiences that we have gained, they become our own, and they enrich our individual worlds.

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