“... in the semantic associations to pottery, ceramics speaks for that branch of culture which is too homey, too functional, too archaic, for the name ‘sculpture’ to extend to it.”

Rosalind Krauss
For almost thirty years, art schools have widely circulated art historian Rosalind Krauss’ “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” as a lens through which to understand three-dimensional art. The tool with which she unpacked the sculptural practices of the 1970s can be useful for understanding the various forms of craft prevalent throughout the twentieth century. Today, while the term “craft” is widely used, its exact significance remains ambiguous. Of the many ways it is used in the context of art, almost all of them rely on material identification: ceramic, glass, fiber, wood, or fine metal. As a starting point, we will focus on one material, ceramic, to tease out a logical way to describe four different types of ceramic practice. Once we can see that craft and sculpture are just two points within the field of ceramics, we can better describe their relationship and make comparisons with other forms of material exploration.

Krauss based her schema upon two material identifiers: landscape and architecture. I’ll take a broader approach and instead use the descriptors functional and mimetic as a way of sketching out a differently expanded field. This will allow for a more flexible methodological tool that can be applied to other craft materials, as well as to other forms of artistic practice.

Starting Point: Sculpture in the Expanded Field

In 1979 Rosalind Krauss noted a pluralism in the term “sculpture,” which, as she put it,
had been “kneaded, stretched, and twisted” by writers and critics so that it could cover newly emerging three-dimensional art forms. Earthworks, quasi-architectural structures, and other combinations of architecture and landscape were designated “sculpture” as a way to make us feel as if we were experiencing work that fit into a historical lineage. By categorizing these objects as sculpture, she wrote, “the new [was] made comfortable by being made familiar, since it [was] seen as having gradually evolved from the forms of the past.” Krauss identified this familiarizing move as historicist, and explained: “Historicism works on the new and the different to diminish newness and mitigate difference.”

Linking together such wildly different works of art as Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty and Bernini’s statue The Conversion of Constantine was confusing because their respective artistic propositions had very little in common. “Sculpture,” Krauss wrote, had been “forced to cover such a heterogeneity that it [was], itself, in danger of collapsing.”

In the 1970s, artists had been reworking the ideas of landscape and architecture both within the gallery and outside it. In either context, in order to be regarded as sculpture, this work needed to be defined as being neither the landscape nor architecture as such. This is what made it possible to differentiate an earthwork from a garden, and apparently functionless structures from “the real space of architecture.” Krauss noted that sculpture was beginning to be recognized only through a condition of ontological absence: “That [which] is in the room [but] is not really the room” and that which is in the landscape, but is “not in fact part of the landscape.” Sculpture came to occupy the neutered position, to be understood only through the “combination of exclusions.” As a result, too many things were being classified under the same label.

If sculpture had been reduced to a combination of exclusions that did not adequately describe the complexity of current art practices, Krauss realized that a projection of the positive combination of landscape plus architecture could provide a more subtle understanding. The projection she used is called a Klein group, a mapping structure borrowed from mathematics and 1960s structuralism that makes it possible to go beyond the neutral or the negative, into the complex or the positive. It also makes it possible to think in other combinations of both positive and negative. While mirroring the original opposition, this diagram also opens it up without altering it.

Under this schema, the complex is the positive combination of both landscape and architecture. Krauss identified these as “site constructions.” She labeled further combinations of these poles, such as architecture+not-architecture, as “axiomatic structures,” and the combination of landscape+not-landscape as a “marked site.” Krauss broke down the stretched and pluralistic term of “sculpture” into a broader array of terms with more precisely identified meanings. This specificity was useful in that it helped differentiate seemingly similar objects that had been uncomfortably thrown together. It also had the advantage of avoiding the historicization of new work through an old term.

**Craft in the Expanded Field**

Having established Krauss’ work as a starting point, I would like to argue that the current usage of the term “craft” is over-extended in a similar way. Because craft practice often involves historical methods of making things, the temptation to construct a historical lineage for the work is strong. But collecting a diversity of objects and practices underneath a familiar and all-purpose term runs the risk of obscuring their differences and causing confusion. The result of this historicism has led to what can only be called as an identity crisis for craft. Because of the difficulties in pinning down its meaning, museums and schools have found it easier and more politic to drop “craft” from their titles. Once asked to embrace new forms of expression through material essentialism or an overly broad historical context, the term “craft” has, like sculpture, been stretched “to cover such a heterogeneity that it is, itself, in danger of collapsing.”

A quick newsstand survey of periodicals dedicated to the promotion of craft suggests some cohesion and a unified style revolving around a select set of materials, whether woven fabric, fine woodworking, jewelry, ceramics, or glass. Once one probes a little deeper into each publication, however, a more complex picture emerges. *American Craft* and *Craft: The Magazine for Contemporary Craft* claim almost every object made of the materials mentioned above, both functional and sculptural, and discuss them within an art context. *The Crafts Report* aims to help object makers working with these materials market their work and navigate the tricky waters of commerce. The new kid on the block, *Craft: Transforming Traditional Crafts*, is a do-it-yourself smorgasbord of step-by-step instructions, covering activities as diverse as knitting iPod cases and
describing how one would extract squid ink for printing or cooking. The *Journal of Modern Craft* claims to be the “the first peer-reviewed academic journal to provide an interdisciplinary and international forum in its subject area. It addresses all forms of making that self-consciously set themselves apart from mass production.”

“Craft” is thus displayed as a pluralism of art, commerce, method, and theory.

To call something *crafted* usually means that it is well made, or skillfully created. This usage has its roots in the history of artisanal guilds, in which people spent a lifetime perfecting their skills at a specialized form of labor in order to produce objects and images at a level that others could not hope to emulate. Our contemporary sense of the term *crafts* is strongly associated with the last years of the nineteenth century, when the Arts and Crafts movement fought for a way to combat workers’ alienation in production, while the term “crafts” was simultaneously applied to the decorative arts. The term *crafts* came to extend beyond the skill with which something was made and to stand for a resistance to the forces of industrialization. A century later, *crafting* has again been mobilized as a social force, positioned as a hand-made alternative to the marketplace monopoly of big-box stores and rampant consumerism, a DIY resistance to alienation in consumption.

Our current understanding of what craft means to us today might be. However, what this paper intends to explore is the idea of craft as a noun, taking as its point of departure the way it is being put to work by art institutions and critics. Take for example, exhibitions such as “One of a Kind: The Studio Craft Movement” at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, “Practice Makes Perfect: Bay Area Conceptual Craft” at the Southern Exposure gallery in San Francisco, and blogs like *Redefining Craft* and *Extreme Craft*. Each treats “craft” as more of a noun than a verb.

While many want to argue for equal status and value for “craft” and sculpture, we must not proceed as if they make identical aesthetic propositions. Each requires a different way of looking, and we cannot stretch “craft” to cover both.

In order to define a relationship between craft and sculpture, and to further unpack the catch-all nature of the current use of the term “craft,” I will examine ceramics practice as a material case study.

Thanks to the durable nature of fired clay, we have many examples of ceramics that can be identified as early forms of “sculpture.” The ceramic *Venus of Dolni Vestonice* dates from 25,000 BC. The terracotta army from the mausoleum of the first Qin emperor of China dates from 210 BC. Up until the twentieth century, many...
articulated this skepticism when she said:

“... it was that the medium itself had craft associations. And these associations are intolerable to sculpture ... And in the semantic associations to pottery, ceramics speaks for that branch of culture which is too homey, too functional, too archaic, for the name “sculpture” to extend to it.”

As she suggests, the critical issue was that in the 1950s and ’60s, it was potters, with their background in utility and function, who were putting clay to expressive use, not fine art sculptors, who usually exploited clay’s mimetic and representational qualities.

The potter most actively investigating this problem was Peter Voulkos, who found that his utilitarian, vessel-based work was marginalized in the galleries and museums in New York. In response, he chose to interrogate the conventions under which his work was excluded. Krauss herself has noted that the condition of marginality can be useful because it makes available the problems of assimilation as a fertile ground from which to draw inspiration. Artists working in the margins are forced to think about the conditions of their exclusion.

Voulkos responded by taying with these conditions as he created forms using the potter’s wheel. But he then tore, cut, and punched through them in order to reassemble the parts. His piece Rocking Pot (1956) is one of his early explorations with this set of ideas [Figure 1]. While recognizably a vessel, this pot seems to be at war with itself, with cut holes, added protrusions, and strange rockers where the foot of the vessel would normally be. Voulkos engaged with the conventions of the vessel—an interior volume and the idea of containment—but subverted each as he drew attention to them. Then he stated unequivocally: “I claim this as a pot.” So then, how should we understand this work? In the past, it has been labeled as both “sculpture” and “craft,” but it does not fit comfortably under either term. If, as Krauss has suggested, “Ceramics is too functional for the name sculpture to extend to it,” we can understand why Voulkos would choose to subvert function. But why not go all the way? Why start with a form so rooted in pottery? Perhaps because he chose to test it against one of the other conventions by which we recognize something as art. He was denying a mimetic or representational quality to the material and its forms.

Rocking Pot is a push and pull with two descriptors: function and mimesis. More specifically, it is not-functional, and not-mimetic. If Rocking Pot is neither sculpture nor craft, how then to describe it?

Strategically appropriating Krauss’ words, we can call this work an “axiomatic vessel.” Applying it to Krauss’ description of axiomatic architecture, we might say: “The possibility explored in this category is a process of mapping the [the given] features of the [vessel form]—the abstract condition of openness and closure—onto the reality of a given space.” In this way, Voulkos’ investigation and creation of an axiomatic vessel matches Krauss’ description of axiomatic architecture.

The critics Rose Slivka and Garth Clark have identified Rocking Pot as an important moment of transition in the pottery/art dialogue. It is also a good point to begin expanding the notion of craft. If we begin with the double negative, of not-functional and not-mimetic, what happens when we project the positive version of those two ideas? Borrowing Krauss’ words, “Once one is able to think one’s way into this expansion, there are—logically—three other categories that one can envision, all of them a condition of the field itself, and none of them assimilable to [the original term]. And one has gained the ‘permission’ to think these other forms. So our diagram fills in as follows:”

This field, the possible combination of not-functional and mimetic might be a different way to describe ceramic sculpture. It seems difficult to imagine that Krauss was dismissing the entirety of representational work in clay. She must have been referring to something else. One could single out the work of Robert Arneson as a way to talk about the new ideas about sculpture out of ceramic that emerged in the 1950s and ’60s. Arneson, like Voulkos began as a potter with the desire to become a sculptor.

Arneson exploited clay’s ability to mimic any shape, and take on any appearance, in order to create expressive, albeit funky, representational sculpture. In his piece Funk John (1963), he chose to mimic an everyday functional object, [Figure 2] which allowed him to foreground the non-functional quality of his sculpture. The piece resembles a functional object, but in no way suggests that it ever could, or would be used: it is pure mimesis. Given that Arneson began as a potter, the “problem” of function was an issue that he was ready to investigate and grapple with, but not necessarily to avoid entirely. As sculpture, Funk John is the combination of not-function and mimesis. But, because it referenced the functional and embraced the hobbyism of colorful, store-bought glazes, it could not escape what Krauss
called “the semantic associations of pottery.” This opened up a rich vein to explore for ceramics as a self-conceived discipline, with its roots in and semantic association to function. Soon, Arneson would leave all references to function behind, but from that point on, his work is best described as sculpture, under the descriptors non-functional and mimetic.

Returning to other points on the field, the positive combination of mimetic and functional is, I believe, a more helpful way to understand craft in relation to the way the term is currently being used. In fusing the mimetic and the functional, craft objects can exist in the conceptual space of art, while remaining physical facts of the everyday that we can use and interact with. This reframing of the term honors the functional history of the material, while acknowledging the new ways in which the term “craft” is being applied in a contemporary arts context.

As an example of craft, I’d like to look at the work of Ehren Tool, whose practice involves throwing thousands of ceramic cups and giving them away. Collaged across the surfaces of these cups are images of war and its troubling cultural representations, from archival military documents, the news media, high art, low culture, entertainment, fashion, porn, toys, and the Internet. By plastering war-themed imagery on objects of everyday use, Tool asks us to examine and question the effects of the military on our everyday lives, and how our everyday lives in turn affect, or fail to affect, the military machine. But the work is much more than simply representation and imagery. It asserts itself as an object of utility [Figure 3].

Merely viewing the cup is not enough for the meaning of the work to unfold. By making his work more than just images, and putting it in people’s hands, Tool involves his audience in the creation of meaning. Significance unfolds through use, over time. The comfortable weight of the cup in one’s hand, combined with the knowledge that this precious thing is also breakable, allows it to stand, by analogy, as a surrogate for human life. We know that in war time, people can either be cared for and vibrant, or used up and shattered beyond repair. To drink out of one of these cups creates a sustained and intimate relationship, in which one becomes somehow responsible for the cup, in contradistinction to the images of war we see through the media, which are disposed of as “old news” almost as quickly as they are produced and consumed. As craft, Tool’s work embraces function as a conceptually important way to produce meaning. It derives its conceptual force from the fact that it is a both a drinking vessel in your hand, and a representation of powers beyond your grasp.

Lastly, in ceramics, the combination of functional and non-mimetic would go by the obvious name, pottery, as it incorporates both utility and non-mimetic, “real” objectness. This is the opposite of functionless and mimetic sculpture. A teapot may inspire other associations, but it is above all a real object, or non-mimetic, if it
is possible to conceive of actually using it. To understand this, we can invoke the work of almost any functional potter working today. To consider their work within the expanded field is to combine the functional and the non-mimetic. If one needed to return to art discourse, it would be possible to apply a language of "4D formalism" to objects of everyday use. Functional pots can produce meaning by playing on color and shape and balance as sensed with the eyes and hands and lips, through use, over time. In doing so, pottery, like craft, has the potential to carve aesthetic experiences out of everyday situations.

These four points, expanding the field of ceramics, demonstrate how there can be possibilities within a single material choice. This field splits open the reductive dichotomy of vessel/figure usually employed in ceramic conversations, and it articulates a more nuanced version of vessel practices. Just as Krauss noted that not every three-dimensional art form can be fitted within the term "sculpture," not every ceramic object should exist under the term "craft." If we continue to call all of these words "craft." This expanded field is to combine the functional and the non-mimetic. Although Tiravanija was working in different combinations of function and mimesis, shared an affinity with "craft" under the labels not-function and not-mimesis.

For example, there is sculpture carved out of wood, as well as furniture as a separate and distinct category. An axiomatic chair might be an object that references chairness, but does not actually invite an audience to sit upon it. With these points in mind, we can make a more meaningful and grounded comparison between Miriam Schapiro’s patterned fabric assemblage that look like quilts and the work of the women of Glee's Bend in Alabama, who actually made quilts. Schapiro's work was treated like painted canvas and destined for the wall, referencing a quilt that had lost its function. The quilts from Glee's Bend might seem formally similar, but they were intended for real beds, and only later ended up on the wall. The former could be seen as an axiomatic example, while the latter, I would argue, could be compared to pottery, in that both are functional and not-mimetic. These same considerations, turning on function and mimesis, could be extended to glass and metals.

If we take this field as a set of operations on cultural terms, we can identify more specific and meaningful relationships between the diversity of objects that are all too commonly grouped together as "the craft materials." This expanded field alleviates pluralism, avoids historicism, and more fully explicates the differences between sculptural forms and utilitarian objects while undoing the material essentialism that is usually assumed of these practices.

**A Flexible Model: Comparing Craft and Social Practice**

Another pluralism of practice, variously described as relational form, relational aesthetics, social practice or social sculpture, shares an affinity with "craft" practices. The limited space of this essay cannot do justice to all the nuances of relational form. But, starting with the observation that both modes of working have suffered from the question "Is this art?" and that that question seems most difficult to avoid when utilitarian function is very obvious in the work, we can use the same schematic, with the same terms, function and mimesis, as a way to explore the similarities between craft and social practices. Only a few examples will be examined here, but they will also help to unravel some of the differences of practices and actions that are usually lumped together under one term.

I’d like to begin by comparing and contrasting two seemingly similar projects, both dealing with food, the gallery as a site, and audience interaction. The first is Rirkrit Tiravanija’s project Untitled (Pad Thai), which he performed in numerous iterations throughout the 1990s. Rather than presenting a collection of objects to be viewed, he instead destabilized our expectations of an art opening by cooking Thai curry and serving it to gallery visitors. In doing so, he took the social act of cooking and the social act of eating and claimed “the social” as the form he chose to sculpt. Like Voulkos’ Rocking Pot, this work is best understood under the labels not-function and not-mimesis. Although Tiravanija was providing food to gallery visitors, arguably a functional service, the likelihood of any of the art crowd actually needing the meal was slim, and in this sense, its functionality was not stable. Or, to speak of
the created sociability of the visitors, one could argue that the event merely allowed the gallerists, artists, and curators of the art world to pursue the conversations they would otherwise have had at any art opening. The radicality of Tiravanija’s work has more to do with the form that it takes, not the services it provides. Arguably, it takes something that was once functional and turns it into not-function. Moreover, the viewer, or audience, is not encouraged to read any part of the food or the conversation as representational, which therefore makes it not-mimetic.

Compare this to Jens Haaning’s Super Discount (1998), exhibited at FRI-ART in Fribourg, Switzerland. In this work, a shop was established in the exhibition space, which offered salami … biscuits, canned food, pasta, cheese, … cakes, and sweets. The goods were purchased in France [and] imported to Switzerland, [where they would be sold as art objects. This allowed Haaning to take advantage of the differing tax rates (evied on the sale of food and the sale of art). This made it possible for the visitors of the exhibition to shop 35 percent cheaper than in Swiss supermarkets.25

In terms of use value, this is a more stable and quantifiable functional service to the visitors. But this work plays with the idea that we must view those things being sold as art objects, or asks us to read them as representational of something other than themselves. Otherwise it would be illegal for them to be sold at that price. Super Discount plays with the mimetic quality of the work. Like craft, Super Discount and works like it in the realm of relational form, turn on the combination of function and mimetic representation.

The last comparison I want to make is between an earlier work, often identified as Social Sculpture, and a newer work better identified as Social Practice. I’ll use Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece (1964) and Michael Swaine’s recent project, Sewing for the People. Both employ clothing as a material in order to problematize and “sculpt” a social relationship. Their methods and commentary clearly differ, but I would like to highlight their structure through the use of this field as an analytic device.

In Cut Piece, Ono invited her audience to come onstage and cut away her clothing with scissors. In a sense, she sculpted the audience and their reactions, by implicating the social responsibility of the viewer/spectator in relation to the work of art. What I want to emphasize is the way the work is interpreted. First, we understand it as representational, or mimetic. The act of cutting her clothing makes the audience aware of their relationship to the artwork and the artist, but we also assign meaning to the act, or read it representationally. Second, we can’t see this as functional either. This is not employed as a logical way to get one’s clothing off. This work depends on mimesis and the not-functional in order to generate meaning. In the absence of either notion, these same actions could be transformed from a social commentary, into an act that could possibly be illegal or threatening. In dual distinction of mimetic and not-functional, it behaves like a form of “sculpture,” which supports the fact that this kind of work has often been called Social Sculpture.

Compare Cut Piece with Michael Swaine’s piece Sewing for the People. Since 2005, on select afternoons, he has pushed a foot-powered sewing machine on wheels and set up shop in Cohen Alley in San Francisco. While there, he mends, free of charge, any article of clothing that anyone may bring to him. Passersby interact, and discussion invariably ensues. Although the work is grounded in the form of mending, the physical process of repair acts as the support for the actual form, which is the social interaction. What I would like to emphasize is that this work depends upon being both functional and real. If the mending were not functional, then the sociability produced would be radically different. We are not encouraged to read either the mending or the resulting conversation as representational. This combination of functional and not-mimetic puts work of this type into the same space as “pottery” in our previous field.

This expanded field of social practice, which shares the same defining terms as the expanded field of craft, highlights how artists practicing in each can be seen to share a sensibility, and work within the same aesthetic space. There are instances where the work of craft makers could make sense in either field, depending on whether one takes as a point of departure the object or the social action. Ehren Tool’s work is an example that easily bridges the two.

In closing, I’d like to once again call upon Krauss to support my meaning by saying that this expansion occurs at a specific moment in the recent history of art. It seems to me to be extremely important to map [those] structures, and that is what I have begun to do here. But clearly, since this is a matter of history, it is also important to explore a deeper set of questions which pertain to something more than mapping and involve instead the problem of explanation.26

I can sense a shift in the way that makers create and relate to their objects, which is at this moment finding wider support from audiences and critics. Certain kinds of object-making have suffered from the question “Is this art?” Once we move beyond that, by positioning a work within the expanded field, we can address more profound questions, such as: What do people expect from their aesthetic experiences? What does the kind of work we value tell us about our society and our culture? And as we begin to note the relational and social nature of crafted objects, we can consider: What are the implications of aestheticizing the social or trying to socialize in the space of aesthetics? Answering this set of questions will help us better understand how and why these ideas can apply to an engaging art practice.
Notes

5. Krauss, 41.