Craftsmanship and the postmodern

Robert S. Oliver

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact rit scholarworks@rit.edu.
A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Craftsmanship and the Postmodern

By Robert Scott Oliver

5.09.2005
Final Approvals

Chief Advisor: Leonard Urso, MFA

Date: July 1, 2005

Associate Advisor: Clarence B. Sheffield, Jr., Ph.D.

Date: June 16, 2005

Associate Advisor: Juan Carlos Caballero-Perez, MFA

Date: 7/11/05

Chairperson: Michael Rogers

Date: 6/29/05

I, R. Scott Oliver hereby grant permission to the Wallace Memorial Library of RIT to reproduce my thesis in whole or in part. Any reproduction will not be for commercial use or profit.

Signature: R. Scott Oliver

Date: 7/19/05
"Craftsmanship is essential to the artist. He needs it just as he needs brushes, pigments, and a surface to paint on." – Jackson Pollock

"When an artist learns his craft too well he makes slick art." – Sol LeWitt

In the Postmodern era the role of craftsmanship and craft in the creation of Art has had a tumultuous history. From the advent of Conceptual Art to the present, the prominence of the mastery of technique has receded from its former prominence in the study of Art. The purpose of this thesis is two fold. It hopes to trace the lineage of craftsmanship through the aesthetical theories that have shaped the Western Contemporary Art dialogue as well as relating this evolution of thought to my own progress as an artist. I hope to show how craftsmanship has always been a vital force in Art even when most critics thought that it was of little import. Further, I believe that it is only when an artist truly attains mastery of his or her craft that significant art can be made.

A Brief History of the Art Theory

In his seminal essay "Modern System of the Arts", Paul Oskar Kristeller contends that before the Renaissance there was not a coherent separate system for evaluating and studying the arts. (Kristeller 163-4). Though earlier philosophers developed the ideas for what would become aesthetics which include notions of beauty and organizing the liberal arts as a coherent group, it was not until the French philosopher Abbé Batteux wrote his treatise Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe (1746) that the modern notion of painting, sculpture, poetry, dance, and music comprising one coherent and separate area of study was codified. Before this time the arts were generally studied under the auspices of the liberal arts. The solidification of the arts as a group worthy of special study in
the eighteenth century lead to Kant's inclusion of them as an integral part of his entire philosophical system.

In *The Critique of Judgment* (1790) Kant posits the role of beauty to be an end unto itself. In this role beauty acquires an equal standing with truth and goodness as divisions of the faculties of the mind. (Kristeller 223) In the creation of the object of beauty, which is Kant's role for art, production of transcendental beauty requires genius. This quality is what enables the artist to create art that goes beyond prior rules and attain new levels of greatness. This enforces the absolute freedom of human creation to go beyond the rules and enter into the sublime. The sublime, in its dynamic overcoming, allows the human to overcome sensation and perceive the world objectively and elevate us over nature. This transcendental nature of art allows us to exceed our surroundings and gain access to true knowledge. With Kant there is a severing of art from craft. Genius becomes the most important attribute of the artist, not his ability to draw or work wood. Here the Cartesian split between mind and body becomes complete and art becomes prioritized in the hierarchy of making.

The Cartesian and Kantian split of art from the liberal arts also occurs as technology undermines the most traditional role of art. Photography, with its exact replication of image, undermines the central role of mimesis as art's primary function. Exactitude as a portrait painter is no longer required when a Kodak Brownie can capture the image more faithfully. This technological shift, when coupled with Kant's goal of transcendence, creates a redefined role for the artist. It is at this point the traditions of art begin to shift, especially away from traditional notions of craftsmanship. When it is not necessary to capture an exact likeness then a movement like Impressionism occurs where gesture and feeling become more important than mimesis. Art changes its focus from that of an outward looking eye to an inward gaze. This self-reflexivity can be seen in the
notion of art for art’s sake, which drives the artist to create works that defy traditions in an effort to produce new and invigorating images. It is here that the notion of the avant-garde begins, as a rebellion against the last stage and the vanguard of a new one. When art’s role is to challenge the past and the artist is aiming for innovation and genius then the priority of craftsmanship wanes. Most of the new movements of the modern era was seen by their generations as lacking in craftsmanship. Impressionism and Abstract Expressionism were reviled as lacking in artistic talent by the popular audiences of their time. Thus, in its Hegelian progression, the avant-garde must always challenge the contemporaneous notions of craftsmanship in order to achieve the transcendentalism which keeps art growing.

The advent of the avant-garde led to a situation in the late 19th and early to mid 20th centuries where art must more rapidly explore its notions of craftsmanship to keep evolving. Here is how we can understand Pollock’s importance of craftsmanship. Where many would see the throwing and dripping of paint as sloppy workmanship, Pollock sees himself as creating a new visual language that requires the mastery of new techniques. This is how modernism continued to reinforce 18th century notions of the role of arts and craftsmanship. By continually shifting the goalposts of technique in an effort towards historical progression, the avant-garde movement still reinforced craftsmanship in the new methods of expression. The “craft” of art still needed to be mastered but the historicist drive towards the “new” (the raison d’etre of the avant-garde) contained the seeds for the overthrow of making as a priority of art in and of itself.
Modernism: Craftsmanship and the Reinsertion of the Commonplace

When examining what is called Greenbergian Modernism, a pinnacle of sorts is reached. It was an effort to create an art, which transcends previous forms and, in this, reduced the works to a radical purity. This purity hinged on the notion that painting could be refined to its simplest and most developed state by homogenizing formalistic attributes that would appeal to Greenberg's notion of the disembodied eye. The paintings which best illustrate this attempt at a highly refined sense of art would be that of the Colorfield painters such as Morris Louis and Mark Rothko and the Abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock. These paintings sought to erase the illusionism found in the mimetic movements of the past in favor of the flat picture plane where elements of line, color and form merged into a homogeneous unit that would help the viewer to transcend everyday life and even their own body. This work could be considered to be the antithesis of the craft object in its denial of a rooted functionality in daily life yet it still valued craftsmanship in its focus on the painter's ability to fuse the formalistic elements of painting into a seamless unit.

A place where the traditional denial of craft by art begins to break down can be seen through an examination of modern sculpture. Here we have the works of David Smith and Sir Anthony Caro, which have traditionally been upheld as masters of the movement. Both of these men produced non-site rooted sculpture that was an attempt to adhere to Greenberg's purity of medium. When paint was used, it is only coloring, not to hide or create illusion. These works are designed to stand on their own, apart from their surroundings. Is it not ironic then that both Smith and Caro used structural steel as the basis for most of their sculpture? What could be more commonplace than an I-beam? I would contend that for all the talk of transcendence, these sculptors actually created a disruption
in the history of sculpture that would forever disconnect three-dimensional work from the art tradition. This disruption occurs in the inclusion of the commonplace object (in this case structural steel) into the work in order to create a sculpture with a transcendental nature thereby melding two disparate streams.  

If Greenbergian Modernist painting was the highlight of centuries of technique distilled into its highest form, then mid twentieth century sculpture constitutes a distinct break from the same institutional tradition and in this a move towards craft. If one is to look at the early twentieth century sculptors such as August Rodin, Constantin Brancusi, or even Henry Moore, we find that, while the forms they created were vastly different from the European sculpture that came before them, their techniques were similar. Carving and bronze casting were centuries old at this time, indeed they were considered the standard modes of production of sculpture. The first break from this system would come from The Russian Constructivists who used common building techniques to create their geometric designs. For Smith and Caro, an important moment came in 1926 when, after learning oxy-acetylene welding at a Renault factory, Julio Gonzalez began to create welded iron sculptures. Gonzalez would train Picasso, whose welded assemblages melded the commonplace with high art. (Smith 37) It was during World War II that David Smith learned welding at a tank factory. Later this technique would become his primary mode of expression as he took up residence at an old shipyard. Smith and Caro created works that used the industrial technique of welding to create abstract works that would be heralded by Greenberg and his first noted disciple, Michael Fried, as the epitome of Modernism. But there is a disconnect within Modernist theory. How can notions of purity and transcendence be reconciled with the techniques of the laborer and the materials of the shipyard? The notion of craftsmanship is still present. We can see it in the specialized if not formal training of Gonzalez and Smith who
were able to transform mundane materials and techniques into a new method of creating art.

At the end of the Modernist era the traditional split between art and craft brought about by Descartes, Kant, museums, and the academy was starting to fray at the edges. Craftsmanship, in the form of the avant-garde’s continual transformation of technique, was still important. The use of commonplace materials by metal sculptors had created an opening for the real world to creep back into the rarified world of art. It would now be time for the whole paradigm of creating art to be turned on its head and all of the previously held notions about art to be put into question.

**Conceptual Art: A New Craftsmanship**

During the late 1950’s the art world saw a new model emerge in the form of Conceptual Art. To the traditional tenets of aesthetics--imitation, form, and expression, the notion of concept was added. Led by artists as diverse as Joseph Beuys, Joseph Kosuth, and Robert Morris and drawing on the works of Marcel Duchamp for inspiration, the Conceptual Art movement sought to place a primacy in the creation of the idea of the work of art rather than the work of art itself. The forms this work took were varied, ranging from Kosuth’s dictionary definitions writ large to Morris’s *Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal* (1963) to Sol Lewitt’s geometric drawings, but the prime force that drove all of them was the primacy of the idea. This view of art had its genesis in Duchamp’s *Readymades*, in which he placed common consumer items such as a urinal or shovel in the gallery and labeled them as art. This act changed the definition of art from materials that were made by traditional processes into art, to art being that which is deemed art by the artist. Many would follow in Duchamp’s footsteps including Robert
Rauschenberg whose *Portrait of Iris Clert* and *Erased DeKooning Drawing* (1953) challenged the materiality of art itself.

With Conceptual Art and its focus on the idea rather than execution, new components came into use to create art. Many artists began to use words as an expression of thoughts rather than try to express themselves through traditional methods of painting and sculpture. This initiated the use of the verbal as visual. One can think of the works of Lawrence Weiner or John Baldessari’s *What this painting aims to do* (1967) as the epitome of using language as the image. Another tenant of Conceptual art became the rejection of techniques and materials traditionally tied to the arts. If the primacy was to be on the idea, then the construction of the object (if indeed there was an object to be constructed at all) became secondary. This notion of anti-technique could best be summed up in Sol Lewitt’s comment “When an artist learns his craft too well he makes slick art”. This statement exemplified the impulse against the formulaic tendencies of the technical arts such as painting and sculpture. When using these traditional methods, artists tend to fall into a style that is identifiable and repeatable. This propensity allows the artist to disengage and create by rote thus producing “slick art”. Another concept that was allied with an anti-craftsmanship notion was de-skilling or the idea that an artist should create with whatever he or she had at hand regardless of his or her aptitude for using the materials. This is how concepts of craftsmanship of materials became de-emphasized in the Conceptual Art dialogue. The ironic aspect to this argument of “de-skilling” is that, while an artist such as Ian Burn argued to devalue traditional skills and avoid “acquisition of any skills demanding a disciplined period of training” (52), the emphasis was only placed on manual skills. When one considers the mental gymnastics required to create Conceptual art, then an emphasis is placed on process of thought and a value placed on the craftsmanship of the idea. Thus, through the continuation of
avant-garde thought, Conceptual art shifted the role of craftsmanship in a radical way but was not able to entirely negate it. If attention is turned to Minimalism another challenge to Modernism and notions of craftsmanship in the postmodern era can be examined.

Minimalism, which emerged in the late 1950’s with the works of Donald Judd, Sol Lewitt, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre, sought to challenge the purity of the work of art in many ways. Primarily, it sought to integrate the work of art with the world around it through the creation of sculptures that were not tied to traditional methods of display. These “specific objects”, as Judd called them, were constructed from industrial materials such as steel and Plexiglas, they were taken off the plinth and displayed on the floor (and in Andre’s case became almost part of the floor), and most importantly they featured a stark geometry that had its ultimate form in the grid. Another way in which Minimalism challenged Modernism was in the methods of production. Where Modernism was focused on the refinement of technique, Minimalism sought to erase the mark of the artist’s hand. This can be seen in Judd’s large boxes, which were fabricated for him by an industrial manufacturer or in Sol Lewitt’s drawings that are executed directly on the gallery wall by a team of technicians. A third way in which Minimalism made a distinction from Modernism was the use of geometry as a generating method for the work. This approach can be seen in Lewitt’s drawings in which he investigates the patterns formed by different sets of intersecting lines. This method of creation can be seen as scientific and cerebral. It is from this idea that the links with Conceptualism have sprouted.

Minimalist use of outsourced construction can be seen as a denial of the craftsmanship of the artist similarly to the wholesale rejection of material creation by several Conceptual Artists. This view would be correct if the outcome of the artist was to create work which bore no trace of the hand of the
creator, as in Judd's boxes, but even the denial of the artist's hand does not necessarily mean a lack of craftsmanship. Indeed if one were to view the use of skilled industrial workers as a means to produce an item that achieves the highest possible tolerances, then craft in terms of skill in usage of tools would be of highest priority. If a person desires the most square and precise steel box, they engage the most professional machinists and fabricators. Thus, even though the artist's hand is erased from the surface of the sculpture, the fabrication of such an object still requires craftsmanship.

It should be noted that, although many Minimalist works do seem to exhibit certain "anti-craftsmanship" tendencies, many others embraced materiality as well as the mark of the hand. Early Judd and Andre pieces had strong visual ties to the crafts through their use of wood and steel as did Robert Morris's use of plywood and felt. Later Minimalists such as Eva Hesse wholeheartedly embraced new materials such as fiberglass and resin and were able to master them in seminal ways. In this regard it interesting to note how loose a label Minimalism is, in that it is more apt to define an impulse rather than a rigid set of rules.

Postmodernism: Tendencies over Dogma

In Conceptual Art there is a de-emphasis of object making in favor of the primacy of the idea. In Minimalism, there is a shift away from the purity of Modernism's formalism. It is in this context that we have the seeds of what has been called the postmodern movement. It is odd to define a method of making art as anti or after something else. The effort to define something as that which it is not doesn't really describe what it is. In order to more aptly discuss how craftsmanship and craft function in a postmodern era, there is a need for a more positive definition. There are many ways to define postmodernism, but for the
sake of my argument, I will rely on two basic readings of complicated texts. The first definition, that of architect Charles Jencks in his book *What is Pluralism?* (1996), would be that the postmodern condition exists as a state of radical pluralism in which elements from many cultures, eras, and styles are recombined into a context that the artist imparts with his own meaning. This idea promotes historicity over formalism in the creation of art (or architecture) in which diversity creates a pastiche that informs the palette and leads to the construction of new forms. Jencks' notion of postmodernism creates the pluralistic stage that allows for the integration of a wide variety into the art world. In this state of radical openness it would appear that anything goes, that anyone is free to combine whatever they want together and call it art. In some respects this has come true in the fact that artists are free to work in any style of history they wish. The place where this idea falls apart, is when they try to assess the contribution of this art to an ongoing cultural dialogue. While an artist is free to work in the style Picasso all he wishes, his art will fail to bring anything new to the table if it does not somehow make this redux relevant. Merely recombining elements of history does not necessarily give them value. In order to see how postmodernism engages history and helps it progress a different understanding is needed.

The second definition of postmodernism comes from Craig Owens and his seminal essay "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism" (1980). In this essay Owens defines postmodern art through the paradigm of the allegorical impulse. Allegory, with its inherent doubling of the text, pervades the postmodern era with a historical context for art which can be seen as dialectical to the purity of formalism found in the modern movement. To define the allegorical impulse, it is necessary to describe its constituent parts and how they occur in contemporary art. These links include appropriation, site specificity, and accumulation. In the discussion of how allegory pertains to my work, I will focus
on appropriation and accumulation. The appropriation of past historical images and their reuse and recombination serves two basic functions for allegory. The first is to create a link with the past, thereby "saving the past for the present". This reliance and acknowledgement of the past also leads to a secondary function where contemporary art changes character from that of the genius of Kantian creation to something more attuned to a cultural mining activity wherein the artist functions as more of an administrator or researcher. Accumulatory tendencies also reinforce this impulse wherein the act of creation becomes organizational through the accumulation and display of non-artist-created objects. One can think of Duchamp here as he placed the urinal in the gallery. He was not creating art in the traditional sense, rather reordering the context in which an everyday object could be seen as art.

Having defined accumulation and appropriation as prime components of allegory and therefore postmodernism, an examination can be made into how they impact contemporary art discourse. The appropriation of work often includes the use of text that becomes doubled through its historical usage and then the contemporary reading of that usage. This allows the text to prescribe its own commentary as one text is read through another. The end result of this paradigm is the occurrence of the palimpsest, in which text is rendered on a multitude of levels (Owens 70).

Through appropriation and accumulation that are anchored in a historical context, we arrive at what Owens calls the ruin. This is the state when the fragmentary, the imperfect and the incomplete combine to create a historical structure. We are not referring here to Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey or the Coliseum so much as the production of new work which combines historical materials in a non-homogeneous fashion. Owens uses the example of Rauschenberg's *Rebus* (1955), a combine painting consisting of newspaper, pencil,
and oils on canvas, which uses elements of collage to create a fractured environment. An even stronger example of the ruin occurs in the work of Robert Smithson. His piece *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) uses both found materials and earth to create a work which embodies a historical awareness as well as representing a trend to entropy and decay.

Now that I have defined postmodernism much as the blind men described the elephant, we can examine how craft and craftsmanship fair in this environment. One would at first be tempted to say that they have no place in Western Contemporary Art. In an era where concept becomes a priority, execution becomes an afterthought, a means to an end. One need only look to LeWitt’s comment on “craft” and “slick art” to see one of the prevailing attitudes during the sixties. When artists like Kosuth and Weiner dematerialize the art object through the use of language, craftsmanship as a notion of aesthetics seems to take a back seat (if not let out of the car at the first exit). But this reading is too simplistic in that we don’t recognize how this switch affects making. In examining the situation in terms of my previous argument of a shifting philosophy of craftsmanship based on the avant-garde then there is hope. If Conceptual art and minimalism can be seen as a continuation of the notion that the role of the avant-garde and art in general is to expand on our conception of visual language or dialogue, then perhaps we just need to see how craftsmanship has changed as well. The key to this calculus is a focus on how craftsmanship can be applied to the process. As I have stated earlier, Conceptual Art signaled a shift to a craftsmanship of thought. In Minimalism we have craftsmanship present both through outsourcing and the embrace of new materials that need to be mastered. Perhaps it is then simplest to say that craftsmanship is a hallmark of process and therefore will always be an important factor in art. At times it may recede from the forefront when other concerns become priorities, but it always
seems to cycle back again. Even today, after thirty years of postmodernism, or rather especially today after thirty years of emphasis on conception, craftsmanship is beginning to return as an important factor in Art. One only needs to look at Damien Hurst, the former *enfant terrible* of the art world and his move to realist paintings or the prominence of Andy Goldsworthy and Martin Puryear and their loving constructions to see this. In a time when Western society makes things less and less as we shift to the information culture, the hand and craftsmanship become more important to remind us of the physical nature of the world we live in.

**Aesthetic Theory and My Thesis Body of Work.**

While the preceding twelve pages may seem a bit esoteric and the reader may question what they have to do with sculptures created at R.I.T. during my thesis year, I would contend that the thread that runs through all that theory follows a similar course to my own evolution as an artist as well my own internal justification for my work.

Growing up in suburban New Jersey, I was not encouraged by my parents or school system to pursue artistic training. My elementary school art teacher led me to believe that I had no artistic talent. If only I had been aware of the contemporary art scene in the late seventies, I am sure my wood and canvas covered geodesic domes would have been a big hit, but I preferred to use them as forts. Thus it was not until I took elective classes as a political science student at SUNY Cortland that I would discover art.

The focus of the sculpture classes at Cortland was divided into two parts. First I learned materials such as plaster, steel, and bronze, which was then coupled with the ideation of concept through guided exercises. The professor, Allen Mooney, made a strict distinction between functional work and art that
had a distinct Kantian flavor. Concurrently with studying sculpture, I was also exploring political and philosophical theories, especially those of Nietzsche and the Existentialists. Natural Law theory based on Plato was popular in the Political Science department and I often found my self in lone opposition in Jurisprudence when arguing for a pluralistic flexible view of the creation of society and the expression of its values and norms. The idea that we are responsible for determining and implementing our own set of rules appealed to me. I was also repelled by the absolutism and smugness of natural law theorists such as Plato, who claimed to have access to knowledge of pure truths. By the time I graduated I was disenchanted with the world of political theory but excited about art, especially that of steel sculpture.

The sculpture I was exposed to as an undergraduate left a great impression on me and the work I would later make. David Smith, Julio Gonzalez, Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore, and Isamu Noguchi were to become the standards by which I judged my own artistic progression. In the spring of 1993 I encountered three exhibits that altered the way I saw art, all in one day. The first was *Pablo Picasso and the Age of Iron* at the Guggenheim. This exhibit included works in steel by Picasso, Gonzalez, Smith, Calder, and Giacometti. This show opened my eyes to what could be done with the medium of steel and, upon seeing it, I resolved to learn the medium more intensely. The second show, also at the Guggenheim, was by Richard Serra and contained some of his *Prop Pieces*. To this day I can still recall the feeling I had as I stood inside three huge steel plates standing twenty feet high. In fact, besides Smith’s *Letter*, I can’t recall anything else I saw at the Guggenheim that day. The third show I saw that day was the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which contained the *Gnaw* series by Janine Antoni. I had not been exposed to art with this much of a conceptual basis and I must say that the aroma
of that room awoke new possibilities for art in my mind. All in all it was quite an exceptional day and my own art making would be forever changed.

Upon graduation, I traveled and enjoyed urban living on the west coast for two years after which I joined some friends in Buffalo, New York. It was at this time that I decided to dedicate myself to learning the technical challenges of working with steel in general and to take up blacksmithing in particular. This idea signaled my entrance into the world of craft, although I did not consider it as such when I started. The creation of functional objects was a means to be able to work with people who knew the most about the process itself. As I delved deeper into this world I was introduced to the work of Albert Paley, and after I volunteered at the 1996 ABANA conference, I was offered a job in his studio in Rochester.

At Paley Studios Ltd. I was exposed to many processes including large-scale forging, high caliber grinding, and monumental scale fabrication. I was also brought into contact with the world of art from the inside. The creation of work, the biding of a proposal, making of models, dealing with galleries, and wooing clients were all new to me. It was also informative to see someone who was straddling the line between functionality and art. During that period Paley Studios was producing both a line of artist designed interior furnishings as well as monumental scale outdoor sculpture. At the time I thought I was in the world of high art and it was not until later that I realized that because of his background in the crafts movement and his continued production of functional items, Albert Paley does not occupy the highest reaches of the art world. After I learned all I had to learn at Paley's, I decided to pursue more of the traditional in blacksmithing.

During my time in Buffalo and at Paley's, I made a conscious effort not to produce art. I thought that it would be better to focus on improving my skills
with steel until I had gained a thorough knowledge of the material. Once I perceived an attainment of this knowledge then it would be possible for me to create anything my mind imagined from metal. To this end I continued to enhance my blacksmithing skills, including taking seminars from some of the best in traditional methods in the country including Peter Ross, Charley Orlando, and Clay Spencer. This increased knowledge allowed me to eventually open up my own forge in Rochester where I produced functional items ranging from candlesticks to fireplace tools, to railings. During this time it seemed as though I had forgotten about art and was more focused on trying to make a living. But making a living was difficult and eventually I decided that in order for me to progress any further I would need to challenge myself and learn new skills. To this end I decided to attend graduate school.

A funny thing happened when I decided to go back to school. My wife and I were invited to do a two-person show at a local gallery. When I started to make my work for the show, the bowls that I was working on turned into wall pieces. I began to be confident enough in my abilities with steel to begin to produce art again. This first series of wall pieces were titled *Alembic*, which is a vessel for refining or distilling. They were my attempt at condensing the last six years of technical knowledge into the process of making art.

As graduate school progressed I was exposed to a wide variety of new theories and contemporary artists that expanded my notions of what art was. I was also experimenting with new methods of making, including switching from the traditional bar stock of the blacksmith to the use of sheet metal to create hollow forms as well as investigating jewelry making. It was at this point that I decided to attempt a project that melded the craft world that I had come from with the new theories that I was learning.
31 Rings 1.04 (2004) became my attempt at fusing the techniques of contemporary craft with ideas related to conceptual art. This piece consisted of the making of 31 rings during December 2003 and January 2004 and then distributing them one ring at a time in a new place every day during the month of January. This piece challenged the environment that I was in as well as stimulating my own abilities while serving as a lighting rod around which I was able to examine many of my preconceptions and beliefs.

The first thing I sought to tackle with 31 Rings 1.04 was the making of jewelry as I experienced it at R.I.T. The aspects of studio jewelry program seemed very foreign to me, from the bench-based working environment that lacked the physicality I was used to, to the preciosity of the tiny pieces with their precious metals and hours of labor. I found this kind of work utterly maddening so I designed 31 Rings to challenge all the things that irritated me. Firstly, to counter what I saw as the cubicle-like nature of working, I made the rings very quickly, making a rule that I would never spend more than one hour on each one. This quick way of working also ran counter to the preciosity of jewelry in that it did not allow me to become over concerned with the finish of the pieces. I was forced to focus on what the basic elements of a ring were and use that as my template. This meant that the forms had to be simple to construct, with a minimal amount of soldering and clean up, as well as still being wearable as rings.

Another challenge to the precious metals was that while I used silver for several of the rings, for others I used more common materials such as bronze, copper, and steel. I think that by following these parameters I was able to create items that still would be viewed as jewelry but, through their construction and materials, they would also speak to a more plebian desire.

The notion of ritual also played a large part in 31 Rings 1.04, from the construction based on strict rules to the daily distribution of the rings. The
placing of the rings and subsequent photography of them in that place served to anchor me in the process and concept. This idea of repetition and daily practice can be traced back to many of the early conceptual artists including On Kawara and Vito Acconci. I believe that I was trying to emulate their methods in the hope that I could insert a more conceptual nature into the materials based world around me. The ritualistic aspect of the piece also served as a form of self-initiation into the world of art. Finding a new place to put my rings every day and continuing to do this no matter how I felt became a method of sacrifice wherein I had to structure at least part of my day around this project and devote myself to its completion. I realize that many people all over the world take much more drastic steps, whether it be joining the priesthood or having children. For me, this was the process that began my drifting away from the traditional world of craft that I had been immersed in for the last six years.

My method for distributing the rings also addressed many issues that spoke to the world of art or were critiques of traditional craft. The idea of basically giving out jewelry for free runs counter to most of our modern notions of jewelry. Whether its DeBeers “Diamonds are forever” campaign or the Hollywood jewel heist movie, contemporary culture places jewelry as one of its most valuable commodities. In giving away the jewelry I challenged this notion by dispensing it for free. I am not saying that the rings I made could hold a candle to Tiffany’s but rather suggesting that we can take a look at how our society values things and what really makes value. As I questioned the distribution system of jewelry and art with my random placement of the rings, the rings themselves also remained ambiguous as to their worth through their quick construction methods and their lack of identifying marks, the traditional arbiter of value (at least if you watch Antiques Roadshow). The third aspect of the distribution that addressed contemporary art issues became the finding of the
rings by the viewer. It is here when the viewer enters that we see the contemporary notion of transgression come into play but not in the usual manner. When critics and theorists today talk of transgression they are usually referring to some act that the artist has committed which breaks with traditional mores or barriers of taste. One can think of Vito Acconci’s ononistic streak or the film’s of Mike Kelly and Paul McCarthy. Transgression by the viewer is a different phenomenon. When someone finds one of the rings they know it is not theirs yet they take it anyway. I never found a “found” sign for any of my rings so that means that the people who discovered them were not really interested too much in returning them to their rightful owners. This theft based view of transgression places the burden on the viewer to decide for themselves where they draw the line on possession in our society and adds a new dimension to what had become a trite method of attracting attention in the art world.

31 Rings 1.04 addressed many contemporary issues that I was experiencing for the first time in my art history classes at R.I.T. including ideas such as site-specificity, transgression, performance, and the institutional critique. This led me to focus attention more on the creation of art rather than craft. After the piece was done, I felt I had nothing more to say with jewelry. It was at this point that I decided to focus on ideas of craft and craftsmanship from the point of view of the postmodern paradigm. This inversion of my previous work became the goal of my thesis as I began to contemplate how I would proceed in the Spring of 2004.

During the Fall quarter of 2004, I focused my attention on the appropriative aspects of the creation of art as seen in Owens’ essay on postmodernism. To exploit the appropriative aspects of postmodernism in my work I began to create pieces that were the reconstituted forms of things I had seen. Based mainly upon images from Japan that I felt drawn to, they included
hollow form rock shapes surrounded by rope, steel boxes with interior stringing based on stones I had found combined with Henry Moore figures, and large woven basket forms that harkened back to my time as a weaver. The fundamental problem with this work was that I took the idea of appropriation too literally and the forms I produced looked more redundant than original. This caused a dilemma for my committee and me.

The solution for my problem and the foundation for this body of work came as I traveled back from a gallery opening in Poughkeepsie NY. I was contemplating a recently completed sculpture and how I was not satisfied with how it had turned out when I decided that the proper course was to disassemble the sculpture when I returned to school. That particular sculpture was a large hollow box that had Sol LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art* written illegibly with a die grinder on the surface of the steel. I had been using die grinders for texturing for a few months but this was the first time I had experimented with writing with them. As I contemplated how I was going to deconstruct what I will call *Large Box*, I decided to pursue my former interest in the abstract forms of Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore. I had been using these two artists' work as the inspiration for my use of string but now I saw that it was their use of mass to form abstractions of the human form that really drew me to them. Using construction paper as templates, I started to cut pieces out of *Large Box* and reassemble them into an abstract humanoid shaped form that became *Corpus* (2004). With a waxed heat patina over its blue steel skin, *Corpus* was deeply reminiscent of a body, but the writing on the surface and the fragmentary construction that had occurred as it was pieced together from *Large Box* gave the object a sense of history and agedness that none of my previous works had had. This was the first step in the new direction that my work was to take.
At the same time I was building Corpus, I began to contemplate my own reasons for creating art and what I was hoping to achieve through it. I was raised a Presbyterian but my family had always encouraged me to develop a personal faith. To this end I experimented with many schools of thought including Tibetan Buddhism, Existentialism, the teachings of G.I. Gurdieff, Taoism, and Quakerism. During the fall of 2004 I was not practicing any of these methods of spirituality and, as the world raged on, I began to consider this. The American presidential election of 2004, with its show of power by the Christian Right, led my to wonder how I might witness my own beliefs in this chaotic world. It was then that I realized that art could be an expression of belief or rather an expression of a struggle to find a spiritual center in a rapidly changing world.

In Taoism and Quakerism, an emphasis is put on letting things be the way they are and not trying to force change. The impulse for both is quiet. In my own life I find that there is a great need for a spiritual quiet, to have a respite from the velocity of our daily lives. I decided that my art should strive to attain this quality for its audience. How to achieve this condition of transcendence is my struggle and in trying to convey this intimate expression my art starts to approach the universal.

**The Introversion Series**

I do not think that my work truly embodies a transcendental quiet rather it evokes an impulse towards that state. In order to achieve this aura I decided to create sculptures for the floor that would function somatically but abstractly. Hollow formed metal is a prefect medium for creating this effect because the sheets function like a skin, enclosing a space and defining an area. In the sculpture *Introversion I* (2005), the gestural quality of the sheets of steel rolling in on themselves creates an inviting form, which lures the viewer in to its seemingly
soft folds. This alluring trait is heightened by the writing on the surface of the material that beckons the audience in for a closer inspection. The act of drawing the person closer to these large forms is quite important to the somatic properties of the work. Many large sculptures dominate the viewer with their imposing size and overbearing attitudes as if they were trying to achieve Kant’s notion of the sublime through sheer force. It is important for me not to confront the spectator, as much of contemporary art does, because that would run counter to the goal of creating a quiet space, a sanctuary.

The mark making in this body of work consists of writing made via die grinder in the steel of the pieces. This writing represents an internal struggle to find peace through the text itself as well as the implementation of the text. The text comes from the Tao Te Ching, an ancient book of parables on ruling and living by Lao Tsu. Through reading the Tao I have been able to gain insight into my own inner turmoil and have used the tools it provides to continue with my struggle. The act of copying the Tao is also a contemplative act that I liken to the ancient technique of monastic copying of sacred texts. When I write on steel, I must wear safety gear including a respirator, safety goggles, two pairs of hearing protection, gloves, and apron, and a face shield. All this equipment narrows my focus down to the act at hand. I receive no stimuli from the world outside of my small workspace. In this way I can simplify my life for a short while and concentrate on the task at hand. It is while doing the act of writing that my most profound insights into the nature of the Tao occur and I have used these in my daily life to further my search towards calm.

The writing also serves as a link between my work and the postmodern condition. Text is a primary component of Owens’ theory and when obfuscated, as I have, it results in the palimpsest. This use of text gives the work a visual history, through the marks, but also an intellectual one based on their original
context. This doubling of a text may be different than what Owens meant when he used text as legible words, rather it is more akin to a Barthesian reading of text as meaning, though I think it falls somewhere in between. Through the palimpsest, the work maintains a further historicity but maintains neutrality that it would not have if the words were legible. This furthers my goals, in that it draws spectators in to examine the writing but when they find they cannot read it, they find themselves in an intimate space with the piece. This allows for a more non-threatening relationship with a large human sized object than is usually available in contemporary art.

Another aspect of the Introversion series that relates to the postmodern condition is the manner in which the forms are pieced together. Starting with a sheet of steel with the writing on it, I cut out individual shapes and reconstituted them by welding them into hollow forms. This deconstruction/reconstruction was first developed in Corpus. When implemented in the Introversion series, the weld seems were left rather than ground down. This created a patchwork quilt surface that drew attention to both the constituent parts as well as the construction and created an amalgam. This apparent recombination recalls the accumulatory aspects of postmodernism. It is a whole form (which is not really whole as it is an abstraction) constituted of parts. These sculptures become piles of stitched up skin, patched together in an attempt to create a homogeneous form but instead they serve as witnesses to my own toil. The transcendence comes from the fact that, although the pieces have a rather tumultuous birth, are of mottled construction, and have a surface scarred with writing and work marks, when seen as a whole they bear their burden with solemnity and grace. This is a state I could only hope to achieve.

The Introversions series also represents a struggle with craftsmanship for myself as an artist. Manipulating the large sheets of steel while they are hot,
getting them to fit properly, and then maneuvering the piece itself has all taxed me to the brink of my abilities. The struggle parallels my internal strife but in a much more materialistic form. Working in such a large scale requires a different set of tools. Literally speaking of tools, it involved the creation of new hammers that could be used in close quarters while working in the hollow structures. Adjustable saw horses were created to hold the abnormal shapes at the right angles to be worked on. I developed a technique of using paper patterns to determine the shape of the next piece of steel. Welding the sheet also required new techniques that could fill gaps while creating the seams. In all I had to totally change the way I worked in order to create this series.

**The Wall Sculptures**

The wall sculptures in my thesis body of work evolved from two sources. The first was a group of small steel forms that were made in the fall of 2003. These pieces consisted of sections of 1 1/4” round steel, approximately 6” long that were upset in a hydraulic press. The resulting shapes were further defined through the drilling of holes and grinding. The shapes that resulted were reminiscent of the works of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth that have intrigued me for so long. These pieces were not an attempt on my part to copy these artists’ pieces, but rather to use the processes that I felt proficient in to create work with a similar aura. The work was finished with pigmented wax which also obfuscated the material choice and evoked a stone-like quality. I found that this effect gave the pieces more of a personal history while freeing them from the confines of a metalworking context. This allows the spectator more freedom in personally interpreting what these works mean to them.

The small hydraulically formed parts began to act as models for the *Introversion* series in the way that they addressed to distribution of mass and
form. Though I chose not to try to mimic the shapes of the small pieces, they still inspired the shapes of the large forms with their somatic nature. Interestingly enough, during the construction of the large sculptures I was inspired to bring a resolution to the smaller pieces. As I wrote on the plates that would become the skins of the *Introversion* series, I propped them in a corner until I was ready to cut out the patterns needed. As they stood against the wall, I noticed how they would look if they were wall pieces themselves, consisting of just the writing. This became my second influence for the wall works. Inspired by my previous interaction with the work of Richard Serra, I chose to construct sheet metal boxes in two sizes (3' x 3' x 3" and 1' x 4' x 3"), which I then rusted. After they had been rusted, the boxes appeared as if they were solid masses, and when hung on the wall they portrayed themselves as having a great weight. The rusted finish was then further manipulated via the writing of the *Tao* with a die grinder. After this the pieces were finished with a wax and linseed oil mixture that produced a satin smooth finish that brought out the nuances in the rust while highlighting the light reflecting qualities of the writing. The overall effect of the mass, the rust and the writings, was quite alluring. In a similar manner to the *Introversion* series, the writing and the spectators desire to read it, drew the viewer into an intimate space with the piece. Once in this space they could perceive the mass and rust in new ways that were not possible from the normal picture viewing distance of a few feet. I felt that this effect greatly enhanced the ability of these works to interact with the viewer.

After the large wall compositions were finished, I was still unsure what to do with the small figures that had inspired much of this work. One day while swimming in the pool, I realized that I needed to create an intermediary step between the wall and the floor. While the floor sculptures and wall works shared some common traits, I felt that they were at opposite sides of a spectrum with
they wall pieces being formalist drawings on the one side and the sculptures being historicist objects on the other. To fill in the continuum, I decided to create wall sculptures which would house the small models in a reliquary manner. I created 1 boxes of two sizes (1’ x 1’ x 3” and 12” x 18” x 3”) and inserted small square cavities that would hold the small figures. The exteriors were rusted and I experimented with writing on the outside and inside of the boxes. Some had no writing at all. For my thesis presentation at the Bevier Gallery at RIT, I presented them in a wall grouping of eight which began to act as an installation, providing a stronger image than if they were just seen on their own. For a latter show at the Rochester Contemporary I constructed sixteen more boxes and displayed them as a group of twenty-three. This ensemble achieved the quality of an installation and has inspired me to further investigate the effects of large groupings.

**Conclusion**

Over the course of my time at RIT I have undergone a transformation from a craft centered functional object maker to a sculptor. I believe this is a return to the way I was initially introduced into the world of making. At this time I feel that I have come to straddle two worlds. The first is the arena of contemporary art. This is the place I feel my work itself belongs with its acknowledgment of concept and historicity. The second world that I belong to is that of blacksmithing. In this community I have tied myself to the past through the continuation of a three thousand year old tradition. In divining a space between these two places, I have become an embodiment of the postmodern idea- a man trying to save the past for the future while still making it relevant for today.

I have experienced many other personal changes as well. It is now my goal to create art that provides people with a sanctuary from the velocity of their daily
lives. This harkens back to a Modernist conception of the transcendental qualities of art but in my work this is filtered through a postmodern attitude of acknowledging the historical sources, inspirations, and methods of the work. While this body of work aims to create a meditative environment, I think it is, for me, more about the struggle itself. This struggle is the underpinning of our daily lives and takes many forms in my body of work. It is in the hammering and bending in forming the metal, it is the moving of large sculptures, it is the writing that is my own call to quiet, and it is finally my own desire to see myself centered and aware not caught up and distracted. In some ways I believe my work has succeeded in that I was able to create a space were people were able to come and be tranquil. In another way, I think that the struggle that is at he heart of this work is the lifelong struggle of my own heart and will always be the core of my labor.
1 Cubism may be seen as a diverging from this line of thought in that many of its artists freely discussed the role of craftsmanship in making. Indeed, the awareness of perspective that was involved in the movement had much to do with craftsmanship. Though craftsmanship was discussed more openly, I still think that the audience was taken aback and required time to acquire the visual sophistication to perceive what I am discussing here as the changing craftsmanship of the Avant-garde.

2 While Duchamp had already inserted common objects into the Art world with his Readymades, Smith and Caro (with Picasso before them) accomplish something much more insidious. They transform the everyday into something new in a literal manner (a new sculpture) while the identity of the constituent parts is still recognizable. This harkens back to collage (and Duchamp and Picasso again) but what makes this different is the transcendence of the material that Smith and Caro achieve.

3 While much of Rodin's work was cast by apprentices and many sculptures were done posthumously, the techniques involved were those that had been used centuries earlier. Also it is worthy to note that Rodin created the models from which his pieces were made. This enabled his workers and, later, his estate to produce pieces that still bore the mark of his hand.

4 But Duchamp instigates the postmodern era rather than participating in it whole-heartedly. This can bee seen in The Large Glass, his masterpiece, which, in a conversation with Pierre Cabanne, he admits to being primarily involved with the technical aspects of painting while saying "a painter is always sort of a craftsman." The Large Glass, with its reams of support material may seem to be a precursor to much of Conceptual Art but by Duchamp's own volition it is also a technical challenge for Duchamp to see this information to its cohesive visual completion. It must also be noted here that Duchamp began as a Cubist, a movement preoccupied with technical and therefore craftsmanship concerns. The discussion between Cabanne and Duchamp can be found in Pierre Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 38, 39.

5 While Paley's work is in major museums around the world his work is not seen by the art world as cutting edge or even vaguely relevant. This is because Paley stopped challenging himself many years ago in the areas of concept and form. His work has become formulaic to the point were it is easily identifiable much in the same way as a Frank Lloyd Wright. While this recognition sells work and makes customers happy, it leads to contentment and complacency on the part of the artist.
Works Cited


Appendix 1: Images

1. Corpus, Steel, 2004
2. Introversion I, Weathering Steel, 2005
3. Introversion II, Weathering Steel 2005
4. Introversion 3 (That which has no form enters where there is no space), Weathering Steel, 2005
5. Scripture III, Steel, 2005
6. Alembic Grouping, Steel, 2005