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dregs / Lessons From the Things Around Us

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Lessons From the Things Around Us

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Abstract:

The writing in *Lessons From the Things Around Us* is in support of the work in my MFA thesis show, *dregs.* I detail the progression of my making and thinking over the last two years. I expand on the material and personal relationships that have manifested themselves in the work and influenced my approach to the things that surround me. Finally, I point to a more expansive definition of Craft, rooted in its material sensibilities, and the possibilities already present in the field that this definition creates.

Receptivity + Non-goal-oriented Activities:

Much of my practice hinges on serendipitous moments and is largely dependent on things outside myself and my processing of them. I find these moments on the many walks I take daily. The things I see, pick up, and learn from while on these walks are central to the development of my practice and the questions I am working through. Noticing these moments means that I have to open myself up to the possibility of these chance events and be perceptually prepared to be struck by them. These events are happening everywhere and all the time. They exist in minutia and in large strokes. They exist in all matter and in every interaction. Each of us is attuned to different types of these events. They manifest in our sensitivities and preferences. This "noticing" is something we do constantly. There are occasions where something will have such a force that it "bodies" its way into our perception.

The theorist Jane Bennett describes this force as "*thing-power"* in her book, *Vibrant Matter*. Bennet describes *thing-power* as "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennet, 6). *Thing-power* is the "impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us" and forms a "complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies" (Bennet, 5). This force is also an element of the *"I-thou"* relationship philosopher Martin Buber describes in *I and Thou*. "*I-Thou"* is that point when a thing has stopped being one's object—has ceased being an "it"—and has drawn one into a relation. You are both confronting each other "bodily" and dealing with one another as exclusivities rather than as concepts (Buber). The connection between the two is a recognition of the capacity for things to be active agents that produce effects, emotional or material, in the things that surround them, including us.

The influence of such object presences is not exactly something you can set out to find, but it is something that one can attune oneself too. Here I look to the practices of receptive attention and curiosity described in the first chapters of Jenny Odell's *How to do Nothing.*

Jenny Odell, an artist and writer in Oakland, CA, recently published the book *How to Do Nothing*. The book is about recouping some control over one's attention amidst the "attention economy" through a process of refusal and receptivity (Odell). This book is an important influence in my thinking. She cites bird watching as one of the places where she has noticed the power of sustained passive attention in her own life. Initially, the birds looked the same and the chorus of calls all blended into one. But as she spent more and more time looking and listening, she began to develop a sensitivity to the calls and their activity. She became able to identify the variations between calls and developed an understanding of where to look for particular birds–do they tend to move through the canopy or on the ground?

As the granularity of Odell's attention became finer, it also shifted the things she noticed on larger scales. She began noticing the shifting seasons in the San Francisco area differently. Whereas the weather is largely the same year-round, the migration of birds in and out of the area began to mark the seasonal shifts. The granularity of her attention also allowed her to be able to appreciate it in realms outside the avian. She recognized that this depth and specificity exists in

anything and everything and was able to extrapolate that attention into other realms of her perception.

This practice of bird watching is what Jenny Odell calls a “non-goal-oriented activity”. While you are setting out with the goal of seeing birds, you have no control over which you will see, or at what time. Your job is simply to go to a place and wait—listening, watching…simply maintaining a receptive awareness (Odell). This type of open awareness is what I am practicing when I go for my walks. Instead of birds though, I am looking for occasions of material force. I started this practice by looking at trees. I was focused on the way they were growing: bursting through sidewalks, continuing their lives indifferent to, but still affected by, our human presence and actions.

While on these walks, Belle Isle and Hollywood Cemetery struck me as contradictory and revelatory for their trees. Hollywood Cemetery is a large cemetery in Richmond. It is also an accredited arboretum and contains a huge variety of large, beautiful, and long-lived trees. They are well kept and grow as they do naturally. The cemetery is kept tidy by regular gardening and groundwork.

Belle Isle is an island in Richmond. It has a rich and tumultuous history, having served as the location for a fishery, a nail factory, a small village community, a prison camp during the Civil war, and a hydroelectric power plant, all before becoming the city park it is today (Cryan). Like Hollywood Cemetery, the island is full of examples of gorgeous, long-lived trees. They are more representative of the trees that exist in the region, though new trees and shrubs are competing with an array of invasive species. Though they are looked after, the trees are not tended to in the same way as the trees in Hollywood Cemetery. You often happen upon places where trees have fallen, dropped limbs, or grown through some of the island’s infrastructure. Noticing this contrast began opening my eyes to the places where it appeared throughout the city. I began noticing the differences between trees in people’s yards, lining the streets, or in front of company owned properties. The trees’ growth reflected the way they were tended to and by whom. This shift also began turning my attention to the debris that would collect in and around the trees. In places like Hollywood Cemetery, I was finding minute natural debris: the odd branch and dropped seeds and leaves. Throughout the city, the more human debris–the loose car parts, plastic packaging, or construction leftovers, for example—stood in contrast to and often outshone the natural debris it mingled with. At Belle Isle, however, I found a confluence of the two. I started seeing places where, over time, the natural debris began merging with the human.

The island is full of examples of places where a human action taken long ago has continued to develop far beyond the logic that created them. One of the most potent examples of the way these relationships manifest is in these pieces of barbed wire driftwood.

A hundred years or so ago, someone wrapped a tree in barbed wire in order to demarcate a space. Over the years, the tree grew around the barbed wire and eventually fell to the ground where it was eaten away by the James and by termites, leaving only nubs of wood reinforced by the rusting wire within them. These mutated pieces of driftwood are a microcosm of the

elemental relationships in various stages of development across the island—and more broadly the globe.

These pieces of driftwood became a guiding light in my practice. They showed the curious portrait of the nature present in human aftermath and highlighted the way all matter—even man-made matter—has a continued existence that reaches far beyond what was intended for it. They speak to a material progression through time and point directly at bizarre and unpredictable material futures. The pieces of driftwood revealed the complexity of answering one of the central questions in my studio practice: “what happens if I do this to this with this?” They showed that the answer is ever-changing and will more often than not veer in unexpected directions.

These pieces of driftwood shifted my focus to include more human-made objects. Before, I had mostly been seeing them through a lens I had subconsciously invented for the tree. They were just obstacles for the tree to reckon with and move around. They were obstructive, but inert and interchangeable. But now, I was seeing that they had material character of their own. No longer unreactive foes for the vigorous trees, these human-made objects were equally vital and impactful partners in shaping the space and relationships around them.

The Fruits of Walking:

These walks, and what I draw from them, are hugely influential in my work. They are opportunities to witness and process the relationship between myself and the things, people, and spaces that surround me, the relationships of others to those things, the relationships between them all, and as a place to witness the far-reaching influence that those relationships have. The walks give me space to realize many of my perceptive proclivities and biases and to find resonance and contradiction with the theoretical texts that were swimming in my head.

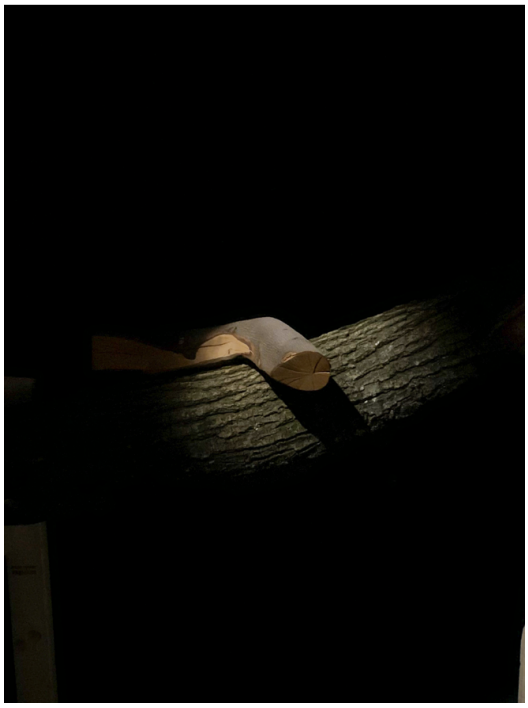
February 2021, when I was still mostly paying attention to the trees, an ice storm hit Richmond. I was seeing a lot of places where branches had given out under the weight of the ice and fallen into paths, onto cars, or into yards. The reaction throughout the city was to make a massive pruning effort when the snow cleared.[1]

Fallen trees, Richmond, February 2021

[1] The magnolias in front of my apartment got a particularly vicious haircut. Their character as a southern tree, with their low and sprawling branches (that make them a delight to climb) was obliterated when the pruning left only upward growing branches on the top third of the canopy. This is a shape more characteristic of northern trees and is better adapted to the weight of ice and snow. This year, the trees are throwing out small shoots sideways from its base all the way up to its canopy.

I was struck by the force of the branches and trunks hitting the earth and by the way their now obstructive bodies made their presence collide with our previously undisturbed path. Those scenes and our reaction to them fueled my candidacy work in 2021. *Phantom Limbs* was a show made up of a series of vignettes composed of minimally carved branches that were collected from that same ice storm. The vignettes illustrated some of the scenes I was witnessing and the way they left me feeling.

Peeking Out, 2021



Looking Down (detail), 2021

Fall Winds, 2021

This work was fruitful in the sense that it allowed me to allude to the expressiveness and character that I was seeing in the fallen trees. The anthropomorphic sense of figure and emotion in each vignette, however, left a bit of an odd taste in my mouth. It wasn't until later that I realized the huge space between the caricaturization that is happening in the scenes and the forceful "impersonal affect" that was radiating from the fallen trees as they lay in the street (Bennet, xii & 61). The conflict for me was in the recognition of this gap and the realization that these branches were in fact already radiant objects that did not need me to imbue them with any humanly relatable character to elicit their vitality.

This tension is one that is ever-present in my material collection and studio practice. I often use anthropomorphic language to speak about the things I am seeing and working with. This manner of characterization is one of my primary ways of accessing and relating to objects. You will see instances of that way of speaking about things throughout this writing. They make for tasty saccharine morsels—and who doesn't love sweets? They are approachable, relatable, and often lighthearted or romantic characterizations, but can get stuck in the realm of the humanly relatable and end up feeling one-dimensional when one is faced with the depth, complexity, and overwhelming otherness of the "thing" itself. This lack of depth appears too, in the more removed or scientific descriptions of the objects. This space is the remainder that philosopher Theodor Adorno called *nonidentity* in "Negative Dialectics." "Objects," he says, "do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder" (Adorno, 5).

The problem I was finding was that the flatness anthropomorphism left was then attributed to the object, flattening it to the single dimension of its description. The indescribable portion of each thing's presence, where its reality falls away from our ability to understand it, is where the juiciest questions exist. These questions do not often have answers. They disrupt our understanding of the world as graspable and as our own. The indifferent existence of matter is highlighted by those aspects of things that elude relation or even perception and by the persistence of those things that have ceased to function predictably.

This inexplicability of *nonidentity* is what I started to recognize in the barbed wire driftwood. Around the same time the barbed wire driftwood triggered my shift in attention to human-made objects, my collecting practice shifted in the same direction. The objects I was collecting expanded to include things that have fallen away from their original use: downed branches, bent or broken screws and bolts, or disembodied car parts for example. These objects became of interest to me because despite being separated from their original bodies they persisted.

A bent bolt is a very particular thing. It cannot spin evenly with the drill and so cannot be "used." And yet it still "is," and even continues to be "a bolt." Lying in the street, it is no longer useful to us, and yet it still exists. The bolt continues to be steel, even as its character as a bolt becomes complicated, and so it will begin rusting. While rust, iron oxide, will continue eating away at the steel beneath it, oxidation can serve to slow the deterioration of other metals, like aluminum. In the case of aluminum, oxidation creates a protective layer that limits the metal's

interaction with oxygen (Kloeckner Metals). These inherent mechanisms of self-preservation highlight that matter's default is often to persist.[2]

This persistence is counter to the human consumerist logic of the disposable. The reaction to "useless" things is often to discard and forget about them. But even then, they continue being. The bent bolt was manufactured to be like all other bolts and yet it is like this now. It is no longer useful to us as a bolt is meant to be. This wear, the events that have caused it to be as it currently is, mark its history. My practice is rooted in a continued engagement with discarded objects like these. The discarded objects are things that people used and, for their uselessness, have decided to abandon. In this way, my practice represents a re-engagement with these things on behalf of the humanity that discarded them.

My processing of these objects happens over time through lenses shifting between intimate and removed. Each time, I consider this thing and its relationships: What CAN it do? What is it already doing? How did it end up in this state, how does it exist in the world, and perhaps most importantly, what does it mean for it to persist despite being of no "use" to us, its creators? What are its characteristics—its character—imposed by time and place and interactions with humans or other objects? If it were to make a joke, what would it sound like? Was it okay where it was? Should I have picked it up? How does it feel being stuck to this other thing? What bits of this profile (invented and otherwise) seem to fit? Most of these questions are unanswerable, but they lead to a sense of intimacy with each thing. They quickly become cherished and active members in my studio. I become attached to the individual parts of each work. There is a desire to do them justice and show just what makes them so vibrant in my eyes and hands.

This adoration is consistent throughout my making history. The degree to which I am involved in altering the material has changed to favor the object as it already exists over what I can do to it.

In my more traditional woodworking/furniture work, the wood's character, its tone, and its grain graphics, are as important in my composition as the form they take. The two inform each other—the form influences wood selection and the wood pushes the form and its details. Much of my time is spent planing and sanding the wood to create highly refined surfaces that reveal the depth and visual texture within it.

[2] The law of conservation of mass: matter cannot be created or destroyed. It can only be transferred or transformed.

Tension Bench, 2020

Stone People in Glass Houses, 2019

Little Guy , 2019

While I still approach that kind of project in a similar way, my understanding of wood has shifted from the plank to its broader material history. I first started exercising this shift in perspective through small carved sculptures that I called “nice sticks”. Though this exploration, the forms started moving away from function and are more directly reflecting the forms I am seeing in nature. My focus in making, however, was still directed towards creating supple seductive surfaces and refined curves that engage both eyes and touch.

Nice Sticks, 2021

I continued to push my shifting understanding of the material and my relationship to it in *Phantom Limbs*. The carving and shaping in *Phantom Limbs* was more about trying to pull directly from the material and less about imposing these shapes onto a block of wood. I was engaging the curves and twists that already existed.

Phantom Limbs (in progress), 2021

Currently, my work relies more on the objects as they are. This, however, is a gray area for me. It highlights one of the primary contradictions within my practice: the contrivance of trying to impart an object with agency through my own hand. The intersection of matter and human action is at the center of my attention and is what I am exploring with the work in my show, *dregs*. This work is more deeply rooted in my experiences and observations while walking through Richmond. The material and influences are manifestations of my lens on this place. The material make-up of Belle Isle and the strange ways the island bears the traces of its history opened my eyes to the odd occasions that litter every walk. Bizarre moments that draw questions and highlight the incomprehensible are impactful because of their illogic. While it is often that initial and easy point of relation that draws me in, it is the uncertainty they present that keeps my attention. Like the objects in my studio, they raise questions of intent, materiality, and material evolution.

When faced with moments like the ones pictured above, I invent narratives and explanations for each occurrence and find that they, like the questions about the objects I bring to my studio, become simultaneously senseless and illuminating inquiries. The photos I take of these moments usually feel as inadequate as my invented mythologies. They rarely capture the fullness of the experience—the surprise and joy at seeing this thing suddenly and unexpectedly—but they do allow me to recall some of the world-building that the moment inspired. These moments highlight the breadth of the unknown and the unknowable, particularly in the aftermath of a relatively simple human action.

The objects in *dregs* are composed of a mixture of collected and made materials including wax, plastic bags, broken car mirrors, magnolia pods, towels, and various forms of steel. They draw on the material associations occurring on my walks and in my studio. My processing of each thing, addressing the material as an agentic substance, considering its history, its possibility, and its relationship to me, humanity, and the matter that surrounds it, is a fundamentally Craft approach. It feeds an inborn curiosity about the depth of material and a desire to get to know each "thing". It informs my perception of broader human-material relationships and has implications for the level of consideration necessary in the actions we take. This processing also forces me to reflect on finding beauty in the desperate material futures the sculptures illustrate; and recognizing that I am also implicated in the shortsightedness or blindness to the consequences of human action. These points of dissonance reflect on the way we move through space and interact with each other.

Rinsed, 2022

The work in *dregs* engages the tension between the short-sightedness of human actions and the longevity of their impacts. This tension manifests in contrived and dynamic material relationships that develop after they are brought together by humans. The show is littered with objects that defamiliarize everyday materials at varied scales in order to highlight the way matter's inherent vibrance brings that tension to light. The works point to a material future that evolves outside of human logic, but still bears the traces of our presence. The sculptures' recognizable elements are often confusing, in conflict with their common material associations. For example, in *Rinsed,* a towel stiffened with a mixture of glue, vinegar, steel dust, wood shavings, and water becomes a telescoping tapered crescent that protrudes off the wall. The wood shavings mingle with the terry cloth, complicating its texture. *Rinsed*'s form defies a general sense of weight. The works in *dregs* celebrate odd, serendipitous moments and their ambiguity encourages the viewer to slow down and adopt a similarly curious posture.

Ugly-stick, 2022

Work Ahead, 2022

nonesuch, 2022

Looking Through The Eyes of Others:

Another place that the walks impact my perception is my awareness of the things imperceptible to me. As much as I can only perceive things through my own senses, I am deeply aware of the fact that there are things completely inaccessible to me. The extent of those aspects of things that exist and yet are not for me to perceive is something that has grown more and more apparent and my curiosity about those things is a driver in my practice. This awareness of my perception is something that has been present throughout my life.

Being red-green color blind, I know that my ability to see color is skewed. This encouraged an open stance towards the vision of others—and a trust that what they say they are seeing is indeed what they are seeing, and likely what is actually there even if I cannot make it out. For example, I have a pair of pants with the letter "V" for verde, green in Spanish, written on the inside pocket so I won't confuse them with my gray pants of a similar tone.

My walks in the company of friends and my dog, Lola, emphasized the extent of the worlds that existed outside my perception and the inability to call any one of those the truth. I started noticing that receptive stance engaging with the way the people, animals, and things were interacting with their surroundings and what they were focusing on. As I was noticing where my attention was going, I too started noticing where Lola held her attention. I realized the places where her sensory perception stretched far beyond my own. She has an entire world of aroma that I will never experience or hear described—and yet I can see her bliss in rolling in deer scat for its perfume or chasing a scent trail through bushes. Out of curiosity—and a tinge of envy—I've tried smelling these things, but garnered little. Still, there are periods when it feels my nose is more sensitive than usual and I find myself seeking out smells to investigate.

Similarly, my friends and peers, like everyone, have worlds of perception outside my own. And as with Lola and her smells, I like to try those pants on for size. Sometimes their perception is clear to me and other times it feels even more foreign than Lola's nose. But regardless, that interaction and the resulting perspective shifts have expanded my awareness of what there is to perceive. While on trips to Belle Isle, I noticed the things I was collecting would shift, based on who I was walking there with—each person was opening my eyes to new aspects of things and broadening the places for those chance moments to happen. The hollow birch logs, for example, came from a friend pulling me to the wet sandy shore to dig and probe. As it turns out, the bark is rot resistant, while the wood is not. The moist sand provides perfect conditions. The logs had been there all along, all that was needed was my friend's guiding gaze to bring them into my world. This receptiveness is something that has always been true of my interactions with people—I've been called a "sponge" for it. This type of exchange is one I am excited to participate in and strive to make reciprocal.

This open positioning has, from the beginning, shaped the way I approach the things I learn. It encouraged a trust of expertise and experience which guided my entry into coffee, bowling, woodworking, and vintage car maintenance which I supplemented with intense hands-on practice and teaching. Whether it be bowling almost every day for about a year and coaching

juniors league or doing an independent study in coffee history and brewing in order to teach a 1 credit EXCO (experimental course) to my peers at Oberlin College, my focus was on gaining a skill set and knowledge base and reinforcing that knowledge through sharing it. While I still have belief in experience and the sensitivities time and practice develop, my thoughts on expertise or mastery have shifted. Whereas before I often saw my teachers, coaches, and mentors as knowing "the" way to do the thing, I have come to recognize that their way is only "a" way to do it. They are immeasurably knowledgeable and sensitive to the processes, skills, and materials they deal with, but the idea of mastery or complete knowledge of anything or anyone is wrongheaded. What has cemented in my mind over the last few years is that the pursuit of understanding has no arrival. Like eating, this pursuit satiates an inner need and propels one forward and can have a satisfying, fulfilling feeling, but it will inevitably need to be repeated sooner or later. This is not as Sisyphean a task as it sounds. We need not see each repetition as starting over. Each bit of knowledge builds on the last and allows us to point more clearly at what was missing in our previous formulations. In this sense it is progressive, but the end is unreachable—like the frog that halves its distance to the wall with each jump—because the expansiveness of things and their *nonidentity* persist even in the most granular conceptualizations.

The forever inexplicable side of things, their *nonidentity*, is not something to feel discouraged by. Instead, it is a heartening reminder of the depth of things. Anything and everything are literally too big to ever fully grasp. A life dedicated to an intimate and investigative relationship to things, or to one thing, is a life well spent. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno points to a repetitive process of critical reflection as a means to recognize the deficiencies in conceptualization—in order to sharpen the concepts it forms (Adorno, 45). He also encourages levity in the approach. If too self-serious, the endeavor of study or conceptualization will either deny its shortcomings or in recognizing the unattainable remainder, abandon the effort in vain. "A negative dialectician 'knows how far [they] remain from' knowing nonidentity, 'and yet must always talk as if [they] had it entirely'" (Bennet, 15).

We don't, and will likely never, have all the bits we need to interface with anything completely. There are others, and other things, that have different bits that see different aspects of things. And those other sides can sometimes be inferred, like my inferring of the smells that pull Lola, by the observation of others' reactions. In this way, our knowledge of the world is limited by our perception, but can, at the same time, be expanded by witnessing the interaction of other things.

Wood as My Avenue into this Way of Thinking

Wood has been a particularly good material for me to develop an awareness and sensitivity to matter and processing material variation. Wood is a living material. It grows and shrinks across its width, reacting to changes in temperature and humidity in its environment. You have to learn to read it, feel what things are happening, accommodate its movement as best you can, but you can't work with it as a uniform material. There are general principles that apply but

only serve as a starting point as every type of wood and every board is going to react differently. I've developed a sensitivity for it and a sense of understanding elements of it that allow me to feel a love for the material every time I work with it.

Visually, the graphics of the grain change as you rotate the same piece of wood to a different face, even shifting ever so slightly with every plane pass. Wood grain also has a direction. Think of an animal with fur or hair. When you pet it "with the grain" the fur lays flat, when you go the other way, it lifts up and gets caught on your fingers. The same principles apply when planing/slicing the fibers: plane in one direction the surface is left smooth, in the other and the grain tears out and breaks, leaving cavities of broken fibers. Wood's grain structure also has important implications for the way it is used structurally. The most common analogy in an introduction to woodworking is a bundle of straws. Representing the cellular structure of the material, these "straws" are what the tree uses to pull water and nutrients from the soil up into the branches and leaves. The sides of the straws—the long grain—are wood's greatest strength. They grow together to support the branch's weight through high winds and heavy snows. Compared to that, supporting a human body is a cinch. The sides of the straws also provide an ideal surface for glue to stick to, making it possible to bond different sticks into complex structures. The open ends—the end grain—on the other hand, are very absorbent and make for easy-to-break connections. Working with this structure along with wood's seasonal movement are the basis for nearly every woodworking technique.

Wood also has a very conspicuous former life as a living breathing thing that grew for decades, if not centuries, always in connection and communication with its environment. This history is one that is not only alluded to, but one that can often be directly seen in the material you are working. The life of that tree is literally counted out in its rings. A detailed history is discernible in every board: from "curl" or "figure" in the grain resulting from stress in the tree, often relating to wind; blue streaks emanating from a bullet left after from someone's shooting practice; or the little two-eyed ghosts left by ambrosia beetles.

Over the years, I have delved into bowling, coffee, tea, stationery, vintage Mercedes, planted aquariums, and bread, in relatively in-depth ways. Each of those areas had a uniquely obsessive community and through books and message boards, I learned each's intricacies. At the Krenov school, I found a place full of equally nerdy and obsessive people to learn about woodworking with. My education there reinforced my fervently curious disposition. The highly technical and often romantic approach to material at the Krenov School took our shared disposition and tuned it. A careful and meticulous way of working and thinking was reinforced through understanding how the material behaved and understanding how to build many of the tools we used to work it. This implicated each of us in almost every aspect of the making process. I learned that, as Jim Budlong often said, "everything's a kit". This adage opens the door to understanding that even when a thing is presented to you as "complete" there is always something that can happen to make it work differently (in this case, that typically meant more accurately). Because we knew how to make our own hand planes—and therefore specialty ones—and how to fix or adjust the tools we bought, we were no longer restricted by their

limitations. It was incumbent on us to tune the tools to do what they needed to do. This, however, wasn't in pursuit of mastery. We weren't making tools to make the *wood* do whatever we wanted, but rather we were making *tools* that worked with the material's properties to arrive there. This may be too subtle a differentiation, and perhaps it is more an attitudinal differentiation than a pedagogical one. The best example I have is selecting a cupped board in order to make a curved door for a cabinet. The material was always an early consideration. Either a board "spoke" to you or you knew what you needed the wood and its graphics to be doing to achieve your composition—a Krenovian word for design[3]. This approach is about finding the right players more than it was about forcing any of them to fit a contrived system.

The closeness that hand tools provide allowed me a greater responsiveness than the machines did initially. I can read the grain with my eyes, feel it under my plane and react when there's a bit of squirrely grain underneath. But still, the material surprises me—I only ever have a *sense* of how working it will go.

It is that bodily engagement that allowed me to extrapolate the hand tool responsiveness to my work now. With the hand tools, I learned to feel for what I couldn't see: stopping tear out, or going out of square before it became an issue. Now, I am seeking those visceral and sensuous interactions with the collected objects and materials I am working with. I am looking for those interactions to add to my understanding of what I am doing and the way each action is working. The sharp smell of rust as the vinegar and salt solution reacts with the steel wool, or the feeling of the fork stirring the paraffin wax when it cools to just the porridge-like consistency that allows it to stick and settle, looking like tar or asphalt.

Jane Bennet argues that "the capacity to detect the presence of 'impersonal affect' requires that one is caught up in it. One needs, at least for a while, to suspend suspicion and adopt a more open-ended comportment. If we think we already know what is out there, we will almost surely miss much of it" (Bennet, *xv*). This approach to matter as an agentic substance is something that craft is particularly well positioned to practice and share. The processes often deeply engage many aspects of the maker at once. They require a sensitivity to the material and how it is responding, an awareness of one's own body and its mechanics, an understanding of qualities of the tools one is using, and the surrounding environment, all at once and in synchronicity.

What Receptive Observation Brings to Light:

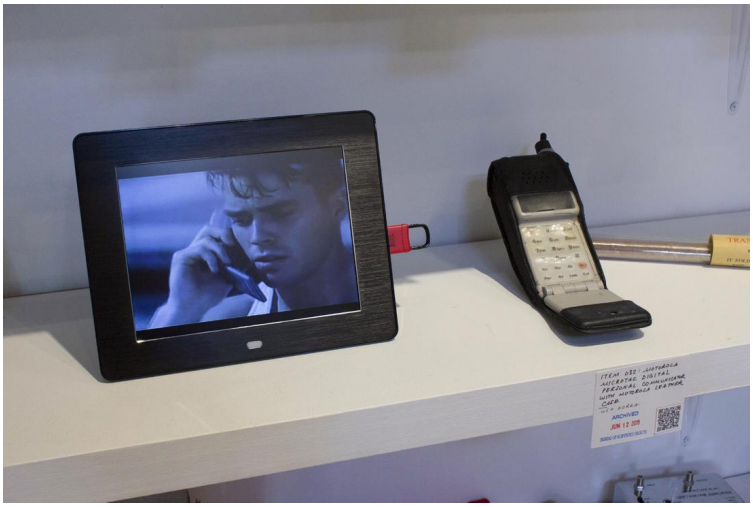
Such attentive and receptive observation is not exclusive to Craft, nor is it a given in a Craft practice. Craftspeople are, however, primed to engage with their world in this way because of the directness of interaction required by their work.

[3] There is a distaste for the word "design" in Krenovian spheres. To James Krenov, design implies a separation between the designing and the making of a thing–the material would be secondary, and made to fit the decisions made before its consideration. Within the pedagogy of the Krenov School the designing and building happen simultaneously, hence the need for a different word: "composition".

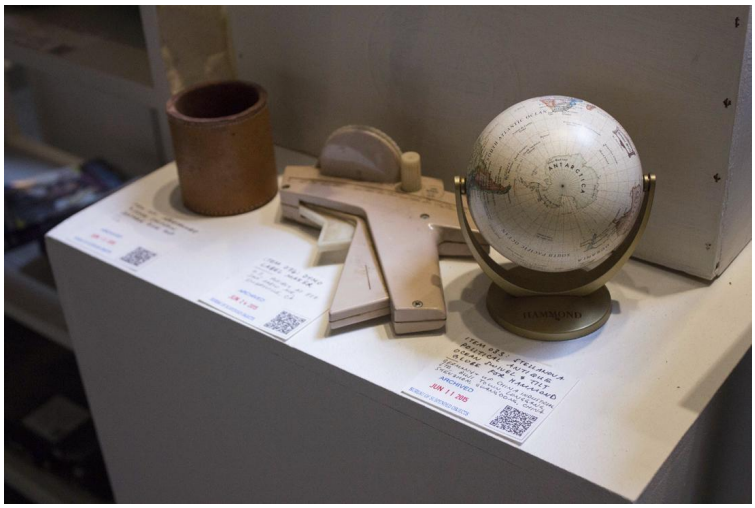
You see this type of attention and its fruits across fields. Suzanne Simard, a forest ecologist, too, used her careful attention to shift the way we understand trees and forests. Simard spent her youth exploring the old growth forests of Canada. She later discovered that the general consensus around the behavior of trees and forests in the forestry field went against what she observed and studied. The tendency was to prefer single stand forests, depleted of undergrowth and later clear cut. The idea was to remove all competition for the trees to allow them to prosper. Instead, the results left stands of trees susceptible to disease with many young seedlings dying early. Her careful observation of the relationships present in logging single stands and old-growth forests led her to study the way trees related to each other. She found that trees, rather than mercilessly competing with each other, share carbon, nutrients, and communicate about pests and disease and other things they were sensing in their environment. Her work was initially dismissed and attacked as fanciful and unsupported. It ran counter to the Darwinian ideas of competition and notions of trees as static independent beings that governed the field. Her studies led to the discovery of the importance of mycorrhizal networks and microbiomes in forests, and the support that older trees give seedlings early in life (Jabr). These findings would have been impossible had Simard followed what had preceded her and dismissed her sensitive and astute observations.

Jenny Odell's artwork shows another manifestation of this receptive posture and pushes her viewers towards it too. In much of her work, she harnesses her sensitivity to where attention goes and the way it is often misdirected in order to keep cycles of consumption propelling forward (and therefore occupying even more of our attentional space). In her artwork, as in her writing, Odell uses context and its removal to highlight these mechanisms and their effect on our reception of what we are seeing.

In *The Bureau of Suspended Objects*, Odell collected objects while at an artist residency at the Recology dump in San Francisco. She deeply researched each object's history and used smartphones and other technology in order to allow people to access those histories in the exhibition. Elements of these histories included: the factory in which the thing was made, the way it looked when it was brand new, and occasions it appeared in popular culture (Odell, *Bureau of Suspended Objects*).



Item no 32: Motorola Microtac Digital Personal Communicator with Leather case, 2015



Bureau of Suspended Objects, 2015

In *Satellite Landscapes*, Odell meticulously erases the natural elements that often obscure human infrastructural architecture, revealing massive otherworldly and yet deeply human landscapes. The act of erasing highlights the way we have pushed these places out of sight and brings them back to prominence in our minds (Odell, *Satellite Landscapes*).

Benicia, Satellite Landscapes, 2013-14

Ship Breaker, Satellite Landscapes, 2013-14

Essential in Simard's investigation was bucking the previous conception of the way trees existed because it did not correspond to the relationships she was observing. Highlighting these points of disjunction is the aim of Odell's work. By practicing these types of receptive observation, we can attune ourselves to notice when a thing's reality and its concept are disjointed, misunderstood, or even intentionally obscured. It is imperative for a critical and progressive people to be able to see these points of incongruity and act.

Where to From Here?

I have found that my craft background has encouraged my receptive disposition. Woodworking has been a fruitful way of exercising it and developing a heightened sensitivity through my bodily engagement with the tools and material. I have been excited to find the places where this way of seeing has opened avenues to access new points of interest and exploration. I think the exposure to other lenses that I've had in the last year was vital to allowing the Craft disposition to become all that it can be for me. This exposure happens in critiques, through engaging critical theory, craft history, and conversations about contemporary craft. I think ideally, a craft curriculum should include an array of voices that balance skills and object making with theory and history, providing a diverse and bolstered range of practices and approaches to the field.

Matt Lambert's visit in my final semester engaged us as a cohort in conversation about Craft, its connections with theory, its ontology, and its history. Matt's visit was vital in recouping my Craft pride. They demonstrated a commitment to propelling Craft forward through engaged and critical discourse and made me excited to participate in it. I left feeling excited to talk about my found object work as Craft, to find the Craft in it and to celebrate the Craft disposition I had been cultivating. Over the last year, I was able to find the aspects of Craft and craft vision that I wanted to propel forward and to bring into the work deliberately. I found that Craft was more of a mindset or a way of approaching the things I encountered in the world. It stretches far beyond the techniques and the five pillar materials: metals, wood, ceramics, glass, and fiber. I realized that I didn't want craft to mean a commitment to any one material, but rather to be a commitment to matter itself. Craft need not be object-based making. That (or any) definitive notion of what Craft looks like is limiting. Craft is expansive: it can be performance, it can be video, it can be writing, it can be social practice. It is the way we move through spaces and the way we interact with things and each other. Craft is not any one thing…Craft just is.

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Photo documentation of *dregs* by Josh Blankfield and Terry Brown