

The Environmental Craftfolk:  
Making Things in a World Full of Stuff

by

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A CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

Submitted to  
University of Montana

Department of Philosophy  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MA in Environmental Philosophy

May, 2024

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## I. Introduction

This Civic Engagement Project (CEP) unites the realities of rampant consumption, ensuing material scarcity, and apocalyptic ideation. It is undeniable that those who are concerned with our planetary health yearn for something better; new systems in which to replace the destabilizing and destructive old. Yet, when it comes to devising solutions, we falter. Timothy Morton argues that we are working with *hyperobjects*, enigmatic entities of such immense scale and vastness, that, in their entirety, are beyond human comprehension.<sup>1</sup> The Sixth Extinction, climate change, capitalism, and the Great Pacific Garbage Patch all unfold as hyperobjects, challenging our ability to confront the consequences unraveling before our eyes.

Faced with overwhelming uncertainty, the greatest obstacle is the ease with which we can become paralyzed, experience hopelessness, and succumb to despair. To engage these challenges with resilience, we require solutions that keep us grounded in the places where we live, breathe, and ultimately face these trials head-on. This is the aim of my CEP. I propose the act of crafting as a way to practically and theoretically explore the intersection of environmental ethics, human creativity, and feelings of belonging and purpose. This CEP takes shape as an eco-craft group, driven by a commitment to community resilience, and the healing of relationships with the environment, the materials sourced from these places, and ultimately, with ourselves.

Thus, this craft group, formally called the *Eco-Craft Cabal*, is dedicated to fostering sustainable and integrated connections with the local environment. While residents of Missoula, Montana, have the pleasure and benefit of inhabiting a land composed of beautiful scenery, the use of “environment” in this project extends beyond its traditional scope, reaching into urbanized and civilized environs. This means eco-crafts are not limited to traditional, indigenous, or

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<sup>1</sup> Morton, 1.

primitive forms of making (e.g., basketry, pottery, etc.), but also include artificial materials that are often discarded, or devalued into the category of waste, challenging the narratives associated with these categories. The craft lineup includes recycled paper making, journal making, repurposed tube goods (wallets, bags, etc.), pine needle basketry, mosaic art, and upcycled bike jewelry. These proposed crafts encompass a diverse range of creative endeavors that demand novel engagements. By partaking in these crafts, participants are encouraged to engage in an open system of problem-finding and problem-solving, as there is no singular correct way to make.

The eco-craft group ultimately serves as an opportunity for Missoula residents to join in a collaborative manner to engage in meaningful activities. It provides firsthand experience of a shared willingness and motivation to actively work against systems of destruction. The use of *cabal* reminds us that we are not alone in this endeavor.<sup>2</sup> Together, participants will foster a sense of purpose, creativity, and environmental consciousness that can only be gained through regular thoughtful practices. The crafts will equip them with practical skills and a comprehensive understanding of what sustainability might look like in their daily lives.

On first appearance it might be difficult to see how crafts, a seemingly small activity, will contribute to the looming issues presented above. This is a valid concern – it seems reasonable to assume that hyperobjects require hyper-solutions; solutions which go above and beyond the normal scales. But, as already stated, given the immensity of these objects we often fall into stagnancy, not action. Issues of such kind need to be dismantled into digestible chunks so that individuals, such as the participants in this CEP, can realize the power and knowledge they hold

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<sup>2</sup> The use of “cabal” was inspired by the following quote from Amy Irvine’s book *Desert Cabal*: “By nature, we are a cabal. A group gathered around a panoramic vision. A group gathered to conspire, to resist. This is vital to our survival, as institutions fail, and tyranny threatens,” 78.

in confronting these problems. The dialogue surrounding environmental degradation is substantial, formidable, and solutions try to take on this overwhelming challenge. Yet, what often goes unnoticed is that incremental actions can render a goal more achievable. This rendering can gradually dissolve the shadows of despair and hopelessness, lighting the way to resilience and possibilities.

## II. Background Context and Plan

### *Craft and Contemplation*

The concept of craft does not hold a distinct, singular definition. The scale of which it is employed is so diverse, whether it be textiles, food, or other mediums, that attempting to confine it to a single categorical boundary would be reductive. Nevertheless, mere mention of the word craft spurs an intuitive understanding; it signals the spirit of making. Modern humans evolved as *Homo faber* meaning “man as maker.”<sup>3</sup> The idea is that humans, as a species, are characterized by their capacity to mold materials into things, thereby exerting control over the immediate environment around them. To be *Homo faber* can be viewed through two polarizing lenses. On one side, the history of relentless shaping and molding of our environment has cast a dark shadow over the conception of making. We create relentlessly, consume excessively, and generate far too much waste. From this angle, *Homo faber* carries the role of creator and destroyer.

However, there exists an alternative perspective on the act of making. As British archeologist Alexander Langlands points out, the nature of craft inherently involves actions of

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<sup>3</sup> The term *Homo faber* first appears in *Sententiæ*, a book by the Roman Republic writer Appius Claudius Caecus, and was rediscovered in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by humanists. Most notably, the term was resurrected by Max Scheler and Hannah Arendt in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Arendt’s conception of *Homo faber* is what Richard Sennett targets in *The Craftsmen*.

using, gathering, and pursuing material engagements. He emphasizes that crafts have, “always been determined by the immediate environment and indexed to the resources of the natural world.”<sup>4</sup> This is not necessarily a bad thing. Making is not linear; it involves circularity between raw materials and human hands. Human hands mold the materials, and consequently, the materials mold us back. To be *Homo faber* is not just mere understanding of the craft, but a profound knowledge of being.<sup>5</sup> Who we are affects how we craft and the materials we choose, and reciprocally, the objects influence and mirror back upon us.

The latter version of *Homo faber* has been neglected by mainstream practices. Industrial manufacturing, production, and the privatization of lands and materials has impoverished humans of our material reality and well-being. However, the capacity to make has never disappeared. The Arts and Crafts movement, the age of “do it yourself” (DIY-ing), and the persistence of artisanal crafts provide evidence that the human capacity to make endures as a powerful force. Returning to this innate ability, as Richard Sennett, author of *The Craftsmen*, argues, can guide us in rediscovering who we are, and lead us towards a more ethical material life.<sup>6</sup>

Crafting, then, becomes a “vehicle through which we can think, through which we can contemplate, and through which we can be.”<sup>7</sup> It is an expression of the maker, the environment, and of the very objects we surround ourselves with. As humans, we rely on our role as *Homo faber* to sustain us, both spiritually and physically. However, it is clear that we need to change the way we make, and what we make, if we want to become better inhabitants on this planet. As

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<sup>4</sup> Langlands, 341.

<sup>5</sup> Langlands, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Sennett, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Langlands, 343.

Sennett argues, “we will need to learn different ways of making...and to contrive rituals that accustom us to saving. We will need to become good craftsmen of the environment.”<sup>8</sup>

### *Inspirations, Logistics, & Manifestations*

This CEP has largely been influenced by a combination of Langlands and Sennett’s narratives of craft, and generational knowledge passed down from a matriarch of makers.<sup>9</sup> The initial inspiration for this project emerged from a wobbly, asymmetrical pine needle basket that I had recently crafted at the beginning of 2023. As I gazed upon this woven basket, I came to the realization that in the act of making, I had not only created an object of beauty, but I had twined my worries into the very fabric of its structure. In reflection of my personal history, it became apparent that throughout times of despair, loneliness, and anxiety for the future, I had turned to making. Engaging with crafts became a representation of resilience, healing, and belonging. Crafts, as this reflection unfolds, unveil their distinctly intimate nature. They go beyond mere objects, instead embodying a binding of human faculties with material stories.<sup>10</sup>

While craft has been extensively explored in various contexts, they have rarely been examined in relation to environmental ethics. There are, however, organizations in the Missoula area that touch on aspects of this CEP. The Montana Folk School, perhaps the closest existing effort, delves into the very nature of craft and traditional skills.<sup>11</sup> This initiative provides classes

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<sup>8</sup> Sennett, 12.

<sup>9</sup> I come from a lineage of resilient female makers, spanning back at least four generations. The wisdom imparted by my great grandmother, transmitted through successive generations to my grandmother and mother, stands as the foundation without which this project would have remained unrealized. It is to these matriarchs that I attribute my abilities and profound desire for the art of craft.

<sup>10</sup> Sōetsu Yanagi, founder of the Mingei folk-art movement- meaning, ‘arts of the people,’ wrote, “The chief characteristic of handcrafts is that they maintain by their very nature a direct link with the human heart, so that the work always partakes of a human quality,” 107.

<sup>11</sup> Find more information at <https://www.montanafolkschool.org/>. Classes are provided year long, and the organization is staffed with a diverse set of instructors to provide an array of learning opportunities.

that teach participants a variety of skills that are often coined as ‘primitive’ or tied to ancestral ways of life, including bird language, willow basketry, foraging, beekeeping, pottery, stone age sewing, fishing, and more. While I have great admiration for this organization, these classes can come at a hefty cost, and are solely focused on crafts that emerge from wild places. Here is where my project diverges; it is free of cost and utilizes materials that are readily accessible in our urban environs.

Another organization that has played an important role in the creation of this project is the Missoula Urban Demonstration Project (MUD), a local non-profit organization whose mission is to celebrate urban sustainable living.<sup>12</sup> Functioning as a hub for the community, MUD offers an accessible tool library, hosts a diverse set of skill workshops, and emphasizes the importance of skill sharing. My 2023 summer internship at MUD influenced the mission behind this project. One distinct facet of MUD’s tool library lies in the broad spectrum of offerings, including a large tool inventory that represents numerous craft disciplines. Members, ranging from seasoned craftfolk to amateur tool wielders, freely selected tools to take home. This dynamic environment led me to a significant realization: craft need not be solely a pursuit of perfection.

With this in mind, I conceived of a project that would accomplish three things. First, I wished to revitalize the practice of making as an ordinary occurrence, something which can be integrated into our daily lives. For this reason, I curated a craft lineup featuring materials commonly found in households, or at the very least, within our community. These materials are not typically found in mega-craft stores, but rather, in our garbage bins: used paper, discarded river tubes, broken objects, small twigs, loose threads, and more. By expanding the scope of

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<sup>12</sup> Check out Missoula Urban Demonstration Project at <https://mudproject.org/>.



materials to include both ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ elements, the project underscores the diverse and inclusive nature of eco-crafting.

Second, it was imperative that this group be accessible to all members of the community. As aforementioned, Missoula is home to an array of initiatives that promote environmental consciousness, but they are predominately centered around recreation. I do not intend to diminish the value of these practices; however, I do believe they are grounded in a complex history of whiteness, displacement, and privilege. By establishing a safe, community-centered space to engage in crafts, free of cost, this project eliminates obstacles for residents, fostering inclusivity and promoting environmental consciousness among all community members.

The third, and primary goal of this CEP, is to provide a practice that serves as an antidote for environmental despair. Crafts provide an intimate connection between our hearts and hands.<sup>13</sup> They are a medium in which we can confront our fears with concrete and tangible actions. By providing a space for communal making and addressing these worries head on, I hope the craft group will promote feelings of empowerment, belonging, creativity, and resilience.

The logistics of this project are relatively simple. First, I created a list of crafts that can be pursued regardless of previous experience and level of abilities. The crafts I settled on were paper making, journal making, mosaic arts, upcycled wallets and bags, and pine needle basketry. Next, I sent out emails to a few organizations to determine a location for the craft meetings. In preparation for the meetings, I crafted a small “seed packet” to be dispersed around town with the goal of hitting a variety of demographics. The handout, available for preview on the UM CEP website, includes details about each craft meeting and the reason behind the project. Participants

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<sup>13</sup> Bernard Leach in his foreword for *The Unknown Craftsman*, a collection of essays by Japanese art critic and philosopher, Sōetsu Yanag, contends, “Before the age of science and modern industry, crafts used to spring out of the hearts and hands of man,” 95.

were expected to register in advanced, given that all materials were being provided for each session. Collaborating with Home Resource and MUD allowed me to reduce costs and enhance accessibility to tools and materials. With secured locations, effective outreach, and resources in place, the Eco-Craft Cabal materialized. What is left to be planned is how these crafts sessions will effectively engage the intention of practicing public philosophy. This is something I hope will emerge through open discussion and reflection in each session.

Ultimately, this project urges participants and readers to recover, rediscover, and reclaim something integral to our human condition: the innate ability to make. It is a call to reconnect with our roots as crafters, recognizing that we have always lived in a world of making. Despite the unfaltering dominance of factory production and manufacturing, we, as makers, can revive the dialogues that unfold between material objects and our human faculties. It is within these material dialogues that we can scrutinize our relationship to, and engagement with, our physical environments. Craft, therefore, emerges as a guiding force; a medium through which people from all backgrounds can directly confront the ecological questions that challenge us today. To be good stewards to our environment, then, is to be an *environmental craftsfolk*.

### **III. Theoretical Applications**

The upcoming sections will present distinct inquiries from three of the five core graduate seminars required for the UM Environmental Philosophy program. In each section, I will outline the fundamental ideas imparted by each class, and how they intersect with the realm of craft. The initial section will begin with the seminar, “Issues in the Anthropocene,” led by Dr. Christopher Preston. In this course, students were tasked with exploring the duality of humanity and nature through the lens of the Anthropocene. In the second section I will address ideas acquired from

the seminar “Thoreau,” instructed by Dr. Paul Muench, wherein I will reflect on Henry David Thoreau’s conception of time and reality. Lastly, I will draw connections between Dr. Bridget Clarke’s seminar on “Attention and Ethics” and the practice of craft, presenting an unconventional ethical perspective on our relationship to the environment.

### **i. Issues in the Anthropocene**

Concerning himself with the direction of contemporary environmentalism, Steven Vogel in *Thinking Like a Mall* suggests that our relationship with the environment is one of *alienation*. Here, environment is not interchangeable with the term *nature*, a known foundational concept of Western environmentalism. Rather it depicts “that which environs us,” encompassing the spaces we inhabit and operate within.<sup>14</sup> What environs us is not only our physical surroundings, but also the social, cultural, and economic contexts that shape our world. Vogel emphasizes the importance of the *built* environment, highlighting humans as its creators, and argues that this should be the central concern for environmentalism. The state of alienation, then, is the failure to recognize the builtness of the world we inhabit.

But what about nature? Nature, both the physical thing and the idea, has been the linchpin for environmentalism since its foundation. In 1989, Bill McKibben’s provocative book, *The End of Nature*, detailed the profound damage humanity was inflicting upon the planet. McKibben lamented that the pristine, untouched landscapes once revered by early environmentalists like Muir and Leopold no longer existed. This is not a conceptual argument, but rather a stark empirical reality. Indeed, evidence confirms that human activity has surely touched every inch of planet earth. Even the world’s tallest mountains have been marred by acid rain, due to global

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<sup>14</sup> Vogel, 43.

pollution. Our world, our environment, is no longer natural because, “We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us.”<sup>15</sup>

If nature means independence, and if that means nature is no more, then what purpose does environmentalism serve? Some may challenge McKibben’s assertion, clinging to the belief that there are some parts of the planet that are untouched. However, ongoing research by The Anthropocene Working Group lends credence to McKibben’s claims.<sup>16</sup> Humanity is actively leaving a deep-time footprint into the stratigraphy of planet earth, with our activities potentially visible for hundreds of thousands of years. Whatever trajectory the Earth was on before human civilization will no longer be actualized. Despite this, more than three decades has passed since McKibben made this claim, and the idea of nature remains deeply ingrained in philosophical and political discourse. Conservationists, preservationists, and re-wilders continue to advocate for the protection and restoration of *natural* environment.

Steven Vogel argues that anchoring environmentalism in the concept of nature is not only flawed, but profoundly misguided and counterproductive. In his first chapter of *Thinking Like a Mall*, he mounts a three-pronged assault against nature, deeming it incoherent at best and nonexistent at worst. His first argument hinges on the assertion that by exclusively focusing on natural environments, environmentalism fails to address the built environments where we reside,

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<sup>15</sup> McKibben, 58.

<sup>16</sup> The Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) is a part of the larger entity that is the Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy (SQS). Many articles have been released over the past decades both advocating and rejecting formalizing the Anthropocene as a geological epoch. See “The Anthropocene is functionally and stratigraphically distinct from the Holocene,” by Waters et al., published in 2016, as well as the article “The New World of the Anthropocene,” Zalasiewicz et al., 2010 for data that support the formalization. However, at the time of writing this, the SQS voted on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024, against the proposal to declare the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch. The reason for rejecting this proposal was that the Anthropocene does not yet have a clear signpost as to when, if it has occurred, the planet has left the Holocene. This does not, however, reject the impact humans have had on this planet. The Anthropocene was shot down on a procedural technicality – it is still clear, given the data, that human expansion is altering the planet beyond its boundaries.

thereby neglecting a significant component of our surroundings. While this claim rings true for certain environmental groups, it is not entirely accurate. For example, the environmental justice movement emerged in the 1980s and continues to be a loud voice for improving the safety and sustainability of built environments. Although movements of this kind have addressed this gap to some extent, Vogel's primary critiques extend beyond this issue.

Vogel resists the notion that nature has ended in the recent century, believing this to be a misdirected belief. When Muir encountered Yosemite and saw God's pristine creations, he was deeply mistaken. It is a known fact that people had been living in the Americas for quite some time, leaving no "unspoiled" landscapes for white Europeans to discover. Indigenous communities had been living, transforming, and building upon the land for millennia. Thus, when the first settlers depicted those lands as wild, free, and independent, they established a perception that would eventually reflect a "deep historical amnesia," into our environmental and historical discourse.<sup>17</sup> Nature's independence from humans is a historical fallacy. If nature ever existed in such a state, its demise occurred long before McKibben was willing to acknowledge. Vogel contends that the end of nature has "*always already happened*."<sup>18</sup>

At this juncture, the outlook for nature appears bleak. However, Vogel presses forward, initiating his final argument, and the first conceptual critique of nature. Here he interrogates McKibben's assertion that nature's "independence is its meaning," arguing that the concept of nature is, "too ambiguous, too confusing," and defining the term, "turns out to be so slippery that all attempts to pin it down seems equally doomed to fail."<sup>19</sup> Here, two distinct conceptualizations of nature emerge: (N)ature as the *thing*, encompassing all physical reality, including humans, and

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<sup>17</sup> Vogel, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Vogel, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Vogel, 9.

(n)ature as an *idea*, as previously indicated. Vogel finds that the end of nature is only possible if human beings possess an “uncanny ability to transform the natural into something outside of nature.”<sup>20</sup> Yet, if humans are indeed part of (N)ature, then how is it possible that our actions yield unnatural products? It is tempting to place this separation between the production of biological and nonbiological. However, Vogel contends that such a simplistic categorization falls short. Humans create biological life through birth, and produce organic matter through bodily functions, such as respiration and defecation. If the distinction cannot solely be attributed to the difference between biological and synthetic objects, then there must be another factor driving this division.

Vogel goes on to illuminate the real driver behind the idea of nature. If it is true that humans can ontologically alter the properties of an object (e.g., from natural to unnatural), then there must be something *supernatural* about us. The argument for the end of nature assumes that “humans are distinct from nature, typically because of their rational/mental/conscious capacities.”<sup>21</sup> Meaning, all discourse related to this idea of nature rests on the presupposition of Cartesian dualism, which is the idea that humans transcend the physical world with their minds. Thus, any interaction with nature, if it exists, would be inflicting an “ontological harm...of which no other species is capable.”<sup>22</sup> The dualistic paradigm that separates humans from the physical world is largely outdated and rejected by many. In addition to its metaphysical conundrums, critics raise numerous ethical concerns that result from dualistic understandings of human

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<sup>20</sup> Vogel, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Vogel, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Vogel, 23.

exceptionalism. Inadvertently, maintaining the dualism perpetuates a type of misanthropy that environmentalism should strive to avoid.<sup>23</sup>

Hence, we arrive at a scene where nature, despite being the center of environmental thinking, turns out to be counterproductive, a thing whose end has *always already taken* place, and an outdated philosophical paradigm. If we acknowledge Vogel's arguments against nature as true, then as he says, we ought to drop the concept of nature altogether, and instead focus on our built environments. This, however, is easier said than done. I will now turn to Vogel's argument of alienation and connect it to Alexander Langlands' ideas on craft.

Given our embeddedness in and reliance on our built environments, one would think that the impetus would be on building a better world. The issue is that we "fail to recognize [the] humanness," in the objects we have created.<sup>24</sup> We are, as Vogel argues, alienated from our built environment.<sup>25</sup> Here, alienation is viewed through a Marxist lens, and refers to our inability to see the built world as something we have created. Capitalist conditions have generated a system in which objects produced by laborers become a commodity for the owners of the operations. Effectively, objects are handed off and the value is thereby co-opted by the owner, producing an effect where the worker "loses" the object. The severance of our practices from our creations has produced a façade where we see the built objects of our world as, "ordinary, external, nonhuman, permanent, and above all *given*."<sup>26</sup> The abstraction of subject from object has led to an endeavor of trying to "know" nature. Considering that we are the creators of this world, there is nothing

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<sup>23</sup> Under the framework of Cartesian dualism, any ethic towards nature could turn misanthropic because, as Vogel articulates, "The human mind no longer looks here like the crown of creation, but rather a dangerous exotic whose appearance poses a metaphysical peril to nature and its independence," 23.

<sup>24</sup> Vogel, 72.

<sup>25</sup> Vogel, 69.

<sup>26</sup> Vogel, 86.

beyond the surface of our objects that we can truly know. Therefore, there is no *nature* existing behind the curtains, and we become alienated from our environs.

This phenomenon is not limited to the laborers but extends to all persons in a society. No one person produces the world in isolation, and while a worker's practice may occur privately, or individually, the production of objects is almost always for public consumption. We are indeed social subjects, and thus labor is, "always implicitly social labor- socially organized, and oriented toward social goals."<sup>27</sup> Our environment is created, supported, and littered with objects produced by humans to fit their needs. Yet, we do not experience them as such. They are viewed as if, "they had simply come into existence."<sup>28</sup>

The problem is twofold. First, complex manufacturing systems, including resource gathering, item production, and distribution, are obscured from the consumer. Sure, one does not need to look hard to understand where and how items are produced. But such a glimpse into these operations provides people with a vague sense of how things are truly manufactured. Resource wars rage, lands have become decimated, corporations outsource developing nations for cheap labor placing workers in hazardous and unsafe conditions, and so on. Yet, the stuff we are engulfed in does not resemble such a story. The books we read, the computers we work on, the cars we drive are all objects of this kind, but their genesis is estranged from the consumer. This leaves us with objects that appear disconnected, removed, and immediate. They are *given*.

A secondary problem is that we are as much removed from the objects of our creation as we are from the actual process of making. Without partaking in the process of making, it is easy to become alienated from it altogether. Rather than being active participants in the development of commodities, many American consumers have become passive observers, funneled into the

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<sup>27</sup> Vogel, 75.

<sup>28</sup> Vogel, 85.



service or tech industry as opposed to industrial positions. I do not wish to homogenize all consumers as such, for there are swaths of people who continue to work in factories, meat packing plants, and so on, who fit the image of a Marxist laborer, but this only accounts for roughly 8% of workers in the United States, as of 2022.<sup>29</sup>

The pursuit of progress has been the primary reason behind the decline in manufacturing employment. Originally, mechanization of production spared workers from the laborious and hazardous conditions of factory work. With technological advancements, machinery assumed work that was once solely carried out by human hands. Nowadays, it's common to find that many objects in our surroundings are entirely machine-made. According to Alexander Langlands, this shift in production has led to a loss of knowledge. Chiefly, we have lost the knowledge of 'cræft'.

Cræft, for Langlands, embodies the "power, the force, the knowledge and the wisdom behind making."<sup>30</sup> The industrial revolution and ongoing technological advancements have distanced humans from their innate ability to make. As craftsmanship diminished, so did our kinesthetic sensibility, physical adeptness, and the capacity to critically think through material mediums. Losing the identity of *Homo faber* goes hand in hand with Vogel's argument of alienation. By becoming estranged from the built environment and the act of making, we neglect the imperative to address the practices that shape our surroundings.

Focused on remedying the loss of these fundamental connections, this CEP works to address issues of alienation by reclaiming the power of craft. Namely, I advocate for a return to the principles of cræft. This approach stands in stark contrast to the technological solutions

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<sup>29</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *A look at manufacturing jobs on National Manufacturing Day : The Economics Daily*: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

<sup>30</sup> Langlands, 338.

gaining traction in mainstream circles. Whereas Eco-Modernists advocate for solutions such as carbon capture, solar geoengineering, and synthetic biology, this CEP urges participants to move away from this realm and towards the basics of making.<sup>31</sup> Solutions of the former kind continue to enslave us to capitalistic systems, which have thus far been disastrous for the health of the environment. To break this cycle, we need alternatives that diverge from growth mindsets.

We are, and have always been, builders, tinkerers, carpenters, and makers of the world. Regaining the knowledge of cræft requires us to return to this identity, effectively seizing the means of production. If the issue of alienation is one of material loss, then the solution to this problem is a return to material practices. Crafts do not ask much of us; all it requires is a commitment to molding, stitching, cutting, and shaping materials with our bodies. There is a physical sensibility required in finding the longest pine needles or sleekest willow stems for basketry, compared to grabbing a plastic bin off a shelf in a big box store. Alongside physical sensibility is a requisite of attention, and as a maker employs a unique type of attention to their creations, they in turn begin to see the world around them differently. If done right, craft can serve as a poignant reminder that humanity has “always lived in a world of making.”<sup>32</sup> It defines us, fulfills a fundamental need, contributes to our well-being, and makes us *better*. To cultivate a better world, we must re-engage with our traditional practices and broaden our discourse on materiality.

Materials are inherently complex, and within our preconceived notions lie layers of untold stories. The crafts explored by this CEP delve into the multidimensional narratives and versatile applications of these materials, inviting participants to reimagine their potential and

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<sup>31</sup> The Ecomodernist Manifesto, which can be accessed at [ecomodernism.org](http://ecomodernism.org), offers a full picture of the Ecomodernist’s philosophy. In short, they affirm technological and synthetic solutions to ensure the continuation of human life.

<sup>32</sup> Langlands, 343.

significance. Emphasizing this dimension of craft is crucial because we desperately need creative and innovative ways to explore our current issues without being swept away by the undercurrent of progress. We need new visions that enable us to see the world in different colors and textures. Reconnecting with our environment and mitigating alienation requires a rediscovery of the art of making through innovative and unconventional ways. Craft, then, possesses a unique potential to reestablish individuals with their built environment on a personal level, offering a more critical position for engagement and interaction.

## ii. Henry David Thoreau

Amidst our seminar discussions, a pivotal theme emerged from Henry David Thoreau's work which bear particular relevance to this CEP. Thoreau's seminal work, *Walden*, offers a compelling narrative of personal transformation, realized through deliberate engagement with reality. Within its pages, *Walden* encapsulates Thoreau's experiment in simple living near the rustic environs of Walden Pond, where he immersed himself in nature and engaged in introspective musings. Central to Thoreau's sojourn at Walden was his commitment to living in the present moment, or more famously known as, 'living deliberately'. In the ensuing sections, I will first examine Thoreau's understanding of temporality in relation to reality, and then connect it to the broader discussion on craft.

Thoreau underscores the significance of how we spend our time, recognizing it as both a mystical and concrete concept that inexorably slips away from us. Time, as we conventionally know it to be, is transitory in nature reflecting a ceaseless flow of moments that mold the landscapes of our lives. The present is always fleeting; at once the present becomes the past, and what was once the future becomes our immediate reality. Consequently, our lives become

elusive. Memories serve as echoes of the past, and indicators of time propel us toward the future. For it is often that we spend our time in this mechanized state of forward, habituating our lives around routine interactions or temporal markers indicative of time passing. Thoreau illustrates this mechanical encounter of time in “Sounds,” as he points out farmers and villagers who “set their clocks [by the trains],” regulating their lives based on these recurring events.<sup>33</sup>

Amidst the relentless passage of time, we often overlook the profound depth and beauty of the present moment. Thoreau’s notable question, “Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?” serves as a stark reminder of this oversight, particularly considering the backdrop of industrialization and Western expansion that was taking place at the time of his experiment.<sup>34</sup> In many ways, *Walden* offers a critique of labor, albeit in ways different than previously discussed. During this era, as per Thoreau’s observations, men were squandering their lives in the futile toil of labor. Despite having a certain degree of “freedom” unattainable in other countries, workers “through mere ignorance and mistake, [were] so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life,” that they found themselves leading “lives of quiet desperation.”<sup>35</sup> This entrapment stems from their deep entrenchment in society’s trivialization of time.

By this, I mean our apprehension of time has become caged by the industrial hum of laborers slogging away. What was once guided by our internal circadian rhythms, the natural cadence of the rising and setting sun, and the crowing of a chanticleer, has been encamped into the regimented schedules of factories and offices. Admittedly, this change occurred long before the Industrial Revolution, but it was amplified by the advent of factory work and furthered by

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<sup>33</sup> Thoreau, 114.

<sup>34</sup> Thoreau, 90.

<sup>35</sup> Thoreau, 5,7.

technological progress. This understanding of time has become so pervasive in daily operations that it has become *given*. In reference to Vogel's argument, we have become alienated from our own creation of time, and thus enslaved to the capitalistic paradigm.

Thoreau attempts to steer himself away from this problematic understanding of time, and instead attempts to view his days as, "not days of the week," nor, "minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock."<sup>36</sup> Rather, he wishes for us to spend our days, "as deliberately as Nature," and if the, "engine whistles, let it whistle till it is hoarse for its pain... Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward... till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*."<sup>37</sup> What is significant here is that Thoreau seems to be challenging the reader to seize the immediacy of the present, wherein reality resides. Given our synchronization with the rhythms of economic life, we must break loose from the cage of capitalism and root ourselves in the present moment.

Those who establish their lives on habituation and routine are living a life, "built on purely illusory foundations," and have become severed from reality.<sup>38</sup> But those who accept the imperative to live deliberately, drenched in the present moment, will live a higher, principled life. Thoreau, however, is keenly aware of the challenges inherent in this endeavor. For he says, "In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line."<sup>39</sup> To toe the line between the past and the future insinuates a careful, balancing act; in other words, it is no easy feat.

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<sup>36</sup> Thoreau, 109.

<sup>37</sup> Thoreau, 95.

<sup>38</sup> Thoreau, 94.

<sup>39</sup> Thoreau, 16.

The decision to live at Walden Pond, in some ways, is Thoreau's attempt to meet the present moment. What we might ask is *Why Walden Pond?* Here is where environmentalism, albeit one not conventionally known as such, emerges in Thoreau's teachings. Thoreau was, like Muir and Emerson, influenced by transcendentalism. *Walden* is indeed a reflection upon his time spent in natural landscapes, and more particularly, the teachings he acquired from nature itself. Living in this landscape allowed him to encounter the "bloom of the present moment," as seen in "Sounds," where he illustrates a moment in summer where he sat in his doorway from sunrise to sundown, "rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs."<sup>40</sup> As he basked leisurely in the moment, he grew, "like corn in the night... They were not time subtracted from life, but so much over and above my usual allowance."<sup>41</sup> For Thoreau, reaching the present moment often takes place in the natural world, surrounded by *natural things*, and living in a deliberate, intentional way. These sorts of things, it would appear, cannot take place in conventional, "artificial" environments.

Here, I will consider Thoreau's elements in relation to my CEP. First, I wish to speak on the idea that nature serves as the medium upon which we can confront reality, enabling us to ascend to a higher, principled life. As highlighted in the previous section, nature has been the central concept guiding our concern for the environment, but additionally, it has served as a fertile ground for spiritual development. Engagement with reality for transcendentalist is not merely an intellectual exercise; it is a spiritual endeavor, in which the subject is immersed in the natural world and through this immersion arrives at a profound connection with the world. Under this paradigm, nature exists as something independent from humans.

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<sup>40</sup> Thoreau, 108.

<sup>41</sup> Thoreau, 109.

However, considering Vogel's arguments against nature and McKibben's empirical claim that nature has reached its end, one may question whether the *natural* world can truly connect us to reality? In this context, Thoreau's might be perceived as outdated or, at worst, as perpetuating historical erasure. Moreover, access to nature, whatever its definition, remains limited for many, both physically and mentally. With the majority of the world's population now residing in urban areas, a spatial disparity has emerged, making it more accessible for some to reach natural landscapes than other. Additionally, participating in recreational activities, the main recourse for those without land ownership, demands a certain level of financial investment in supplies, travel, and engagement. On top of this, natural places are not always physical accessible for those who do not have the physical capabilities to immerse themselves in nature as Thoreau espouses.

It is also conceptually inaccessible, particularly for certain populations in the United States, such as Black Americans, who harbor perceptions of wild spaces informed by historical trauma. In "African American Wildland Memories," Johnson and Bowker discuss how black Americans maintain an ambiguous relationship with wildlands as a response to the legacy of slavery (2004). Evelyn C. White wrote in her article on black women's relationship with wilderness,

"The timidity African American women feel about the outdoors is colored, I believe, by our experiences of racism and sexism in this nation. It is steeped in the physical and psychic damage we have suffered as a result of being forcefully removed from Africa and enslaved on southern plantations. Ask yourself why a black woman would find solace under the sun knowing that her foremothers had toiled in the brutal, blistering heat for slavemasters."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> White, Evelyn C. "Black Women and Wilderness," *Outdoor Woman*, 1991.

This illustrates how certain populations in the United States, due to their history of violence and trauma, are unable to access reality through Thoreau's methods. There are other examples which most poignantly include the displacement and erasure of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands. To return to nature as the sole means of connecting with reality overlooks the experiences and barriers faced by marginalized communities. For this reason, I wished to enact a CEP that was mindful of these issues. One of my objectives was to cultivate an inclusive space that accommodated everyone, both physically and conceptually. Consequently, I organized my craft groups to be held in urban settings, within open community spaces, where participants were not confined to the constraints of wilderness immersion. I also deliberately chose crafts that were largely accessible and did not ask much physical effort. Even the creation of pine needle baskets, which require participants to gather pine needles, could be accomplished on campus using needles found along sidewalks and roads.

Furthermore, I argue that there must be alternative avenues, aside from transcendentalism, through which individuals can engage with the reality of our world. Nonetheless, I maintain Thoreau's emphasis on the present moment, viewing it as a conduit through which we can continue to connect with reality. Where I diverge, however, is the medium in which this process occurs. As I have argued and will continue to advocate for in the following section, crafts can serve this function. The practice of craft both grounds us in the present moment and connects us to reality through hands-on engagement and creation. It is important that we can realize the world we live in, which, as Vogel has argued, is one that we have built. This is our reality, yet, we have become estranged from it. Immersing oneself in the present moment through the activity of craft can lead us to a profound recognition of our reality. The concluding theoretical section will delve further into this claim, synthesizing the insights from all



three sections. It will bridge the act of making with the faculty of attention, providing a comprehensive understanding of how engagement with craft can help us overcome feelings of despair and alienation.

### **iii. Attention and Ethics**

#### *The Attention Industry*

The attention seminar, taking place in Autumn of 2023, opened in dramatic fashion with the following claim, “We are at risk, without quite fully realizing it, of living lives that are less our own than we imagine.”<sup>43</sup> Timothy Wu, a professor at Columbia Law School, wrote *The Attention Merchants* in 2016 with intent of warning the public that their attention, something so seemingly private, had become a public commodity to be harvested by advertising and techno agencies. You don’t have to look far to realize technology has become uncomfortably pervasive in our daily lives. This realization prompts us to question the extent to which we exercise agency over our attention in the increasingly digitized world.

Before we begin a discussion of attention, however, it might be helpful to define it. The act of attending might mean different things for different scholars. Even within this section, it will present itself in different forms. However, what can be agreed upon, and will serve as an anchor for this exploration, is that attention is best described as a conscious experience in which the agent takes possession of an object with their mind, while simultaneously ignoring several other stimuli. It is the facilitation of external information being processed by our brains. We, as agents, have historically been in control of deciding, “what stream of information, among various choices, we will attend to, or process.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Wu, “Attention Brokers,” 5.

Attention serves as a vital faculty for human beings, as it directly affects the shape and quality of our lives. Who we are, the decisions we make, and our experience of the world are all predicated on our ability to direct our attention to the things we care about. In every moment of our waking life, we are besieged with information. To block out certain stimuli, and tune into others, is the power of paying attention. The issue, however, is that “we are always paying attention to *something*.”<sup>45</sup> This means we are also always actively ignoring other things. Therefore, when we direct our attention to our phones while walking down the street, we might miss the fact that a lamppost stands five feet in front of us, ready to be barged into.

This is where we find ourselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; addicted to the images and sounds that emit from our devices. However, as Wu illuminates, the hand we hold has not been entirely chosen, but rather dealt out by the *attention industry*. Historically composed of advertising agencies, this industry has expanded into the Technosphere, the realm of technology in which most modern-day humans are entrenched. Attention has become a sought-after commodity, and the industry is doing whatever it can to exploit and capitalize on this intimate resource. Everything seems to be evolving towards greater interactivity, sensationalism, and convenience, yet beneath this façade lies the insidious agenda of the attention industry, ceaselessly trying to capture our attention.

Just as we have the power to direct our lives accordingly to the things we care about, the attention industry, “whose very business is the influence of consciousness, can and will radically shape how our lives are lived.”<sup>46</sup> The digital age has witnessed the emergence of the attention industry as a profound force behind the shaping and directing of human behaviors, decisions and attention. Hence, when Wu says *we are at risk. . . of living lives that are less our own than we*

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<sup>45</sup>Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 6.

*imagine*, he means to say that this industry, with its ubiquitous presence and ever-changing method to capture our attention, is shaping our lives for the worse.

### *Attention, Ethics, & the Environment*

Attention is a term seldom explored in environmental philosophy. That said, regarding Vogel's assertions on alienation, attention emerges as a significant factor. Our detachment from the built world stems from our failure to *pay attention* to it. Consider factory workers who relinquish their creations to factory owners; not only do they become alienated through transfer of ownership, but also because their attention shifts to other pressing matters. Here, alienation is concerned with *both* the material conditions and a failure to attend. This section will largely focus on Iris Murdoch's framing of attention as a moral activity. What Murdoch provides for this discussion is a *different* type of alienation that is not antithetical to, or absent from, a Marxist account of alienation. In the subsequent discussion, attention will imbue a thicker meaning, paving the way to revisit both conceptions of alienation.

Margaret G. Holland, drawing from Iris Murdoch and Simone Veil, establishes attention as an "inner moral activity," which includes the act of, "[emptying] one's mind of content which would distract one from clearly seeing the object that one seeks to understand."<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the act of attending is a dual process. First, it aligns with Wu's concept of attention, requiring the agent to concentrate attention solely on a single object, while omitting all other stimuli. However, the scope of what can be perceived extends beyond the external world; it encompasses the internal realm as well. This is because attention is not confined to mere reception of external stimuli by our senses; it also includes the esoteric contemplation and introspection that occur

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<sup>47</sup> Holland, 307.

within our minds. Hence, attention involves both directing our gaze outward towards objects and regulating our inner life so that we might see clearly.

How then, can attention be considered a “moral activity” if much of it transpires within? The modern understanding of the moral life often paints it as a realm of choices and rules.<sup>48</sup> Within this framework, the moral agent wields the freedom to choose from a set of presented facts, and through reason, they establish their own guiding principles. The emphasis on will and choice was deliberate, as moral life became something which can only be presented through observable actions rather than the inner workings of the “private theatre.” In an effort to widen the conceptual landscape, Murdoch presents attention as an alternative framework, expanding moral material beyond mere choices and rules. In *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch suggests, “By the time the moment of choice has arrived the quality of attention has probably determined the nature of the act.”<sup>49</sup> Therefore, when faced with choices, it is likely that the nature of the decision was already determined by one’s quality of attention.

That attention is a matter of quality is key. It is not an on or off switch, nor is it merely about noticing or not noticing. Instead, there is a world of variation in the quality of our attention; we can notice the world in better and worse ways. To navigate towards the right choices, then, the agent must possess clear vision, or in other words, the ability to discern elements of a moral situation that align with reality. As demonstrated in the preceding section, encountering reality is a challenging task. Murdoch identifies the *self*, and the fantasies it conjures, as the obstacle that impedes our quality of attention. Silvia Caprioglio Panizza, a contemporary of Murdoch, believes there is something inherent “about our selves that distances

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<sup>48</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 61.

<sup>49</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 67.

us from reality.”<sup>50</sup> In her book, she puts forth two hypotheses as to how the self-obfuscates reality.

In the first hypothesis, it is the “fat relentless ego” which impedes our ability to attend, as it provides a mirage wherein, we are, “the most important item in the world,” and so we, “turn our focus and our energies towards ourselves, and arrange everything else accordingly.”<sup>51</sup> As a result, our perception becomes tainted with self-concern, leading to a failure of vision. This is because all objects are initially filtered through the lens of self-reference. Here, it is the ego that is the primary source of our fantasies. In contrast, Panizza’s second hypothesis proposes that it is not a vicious or malfunctioning self that distorts vision, rather, perhaps the self – itself – is the distorting fantasy. This stands in stark contrast to the former perspective, which might aim to improve the self by addressing ego-driven tendencies. Regardless, both perspectives concur on one point: the self serves as a wellspring of fantasy. The resulting fantasies, whether stemming from the ego or the entire self, act as self-protective mechanisms, consoling and distorting our perception of the world we inhabit. Attention, then, works to overcome these illusions which separate us from reality by a sheen veil.

Returning to Vogel’s argument, the crux of the matter lies in our failure to recognize the built world as a product of our own doing, and thus, we succumb to the illusion that it has simply come into existence independent of us. As we have seen, Vogel’s idea of alienation is concerned with the abstraction of the product from the maker. What I have argued in the first section is that the physical act of crafting provides an avenue to seize the means of production, effectively unalienating oneself from the built environment. But we are still alienated in a way which Murdoch helps us to see; namely, alienation is a type of fantasy we construct.

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<sup>50</sup> Panizza, 68.

<sup>51</sup> Panizza, 76.

Vogel suggests we are alienated from our built environment because we do not *see* it as an object of our creation. Take note of the metaphor of vision. The “we” Vogel speaks of is not limited to the laborers, but instead extends to all humans who live and participate in socially organized systems. This draws from the Marxist idea of sociality, in which all labor is social labor, and all objects emerge within a particular social system.<sup>52</sup> And so, all human beings who are part of these systems are actively building this world, but they don’t recognize it as such. Vogel ultimately suggests that overcoming alienation requires, “recognizing and acknowledging this sociality by asserting conscious and voluntary social control over production.”<sup>53</sup> An interpretation of this might be, simply speaking, a call to recognize our *reality*.<sup>54</sup> That is, that we have physically and socially built this world. But, as Murdoch’s account shows us, recognizing reality is rather difficult because we have a natural inclination towards fantasy fabrication.

Alienation as a fantasy cannot be pinned down into one, unified example. While the function of the self is universal, the illusions we conjure up as individuals will never be perfectly the same. The laborer, who views their own labor as an individual activity rather than as social labor, might view their products as mere means to their self-concerned ends. Thus, the laborer *sees* their production as a monetary transaction, and then loses the object once handed off. The reality of the situation, however, is that the object is and always will be a product of their own doing. As I have suggested, there are two types of alienation at play in this scenario. First, the

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<sup>52</sup> Vogel, 75.

<sup>53</sup> Vogel, 76.

<sup>54</sup> One might reject my interpretation of this call to action by taking a staunch Marxist stance on alienation. A Marxist scholar might argue that what truly matters here is that the solution involves overcoming capitalistic material conditions and by seizing the means of production the problem of alienation will be solved. But here I am notably pushing back. The Marxist view of alienation is vital in considering the built environment and I have shown, craft, in its very essence, has the capabilities of dispelling this issue. Here, I am considering a different type of alienation, one that can be recognized within a Marxist system of alienation, and that speaks more directly to our failure of attention. Attention, as an ongoing and intimate faculty, is *always* present, and so it seems fitting to consider it as a contributor to the state of alienation. This is not to undermine the Marxist’s theory, but rather, to enhance and synergize with it.

laborer becomes alienated through the subject-object abstraction (i.e., the Marxist theory). Second, the laborer becomes alienated because of a *failure to attend*. The genesis of the object was never changed in the transaction between the laborer and the factory owner. The reality of this, however, becomes concealed by the type of self-concern Panizza warns us about. While the worker focuses their attention on compensation for their labor, the object of their creation plunges into the murky shadows of reality. It is the quality and direction of vision that produces a fantasy which estranges us from the built world. Such could be said, albeit in different ways, about consumers and their failure to realize the sociality inherent in items.

And so, what we are left with is a need to reorient ourselves. This reorientation, however, cannot transpire if we do not attend to the reality of our world. That is, to see it for what it really is: a built environment. As I previously suggested, Thoreau's methods of engaging with reality are inadequate for this challenge. Here is where craft emerges as an optimal practice for achieving this reorientation. Craft, fundamentally, entails a practice of attention and can be understood through two distinct perspectives.

### *The Craft of Attention & the Attention of Craft*

Craft as attention, in its most recognizable form, aligns with what Dorothea Debus terms “full attention.”<sup>55</sup> This type of attention is most evident in those who focus exclusively on an object, such as a surgeon during surgery. The patient becomes the sole focus of their attention, to the exclusion of the surgeon's own self and any other object. Effectively, the agent “loses herself” in the act of attending. This immersion in the object leads to “a heightened sense of

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<sup>55</sup> Debus, 1177.

reality, and an increased openness to the object she attends to, and by extension an increased openness to the world.”<sup>56</sup>

This mirrors the experiences one might encounter when engaging with craft. Consider the pine needle basket that sparked this project. I embarked on a question project on the slopes of Blue Mountain in search of the perfect needles. They needed to be long yet not excessively so, and older, but not so old that they were plagued with decaying fungus and mildew. The prime locations for finding these needles were near recently fallen branches, or trees which retained snow underneath, in which the needles rested delicately on gleaning snow, ready to be plucked. Foraging for needles demanded utmost attention; I became engrossed in the pursuit, spending nearly three hours meticulously collecting and safely stashing each needle. I had lost myself. This state persisted throughout the basket-making process. Hours were spent wetting, stitching, and coiling needles to fashion an imperfect vessel with an imperfect lid.

In essence, I had immersed myself in the craft at hand. My attention was wholly anchored in the material reality of these pine needles, from inception to completion. However, the practice of craft had left its mark on me. Through full attention, I had discovered aspects of myself that would have otherwise remained hidden.<sup>57</sup> Crafting the pine needle basket not only revealed insights but also transformed my perception of the world. Now, every glance at a Ponderosa Pine prompts an assessment of the scattered needles below. My awareness and appreciation of this environment have been heightened through craft.

A reorientation had taken place, leaving my vision of the built environment reshaped. The adage “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure” rings true in this context. Discarded items

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<sup>56</sup> Debus, 1179.

<sup>57</sup> Richard Sennet argues in *The Craftsmen* that the “process of making concrete things reveals to us about ourselves,” 8.



by the roadside spur contemplation for their potential utility. Smooth stones found during walks are repurposed into buttons. I discern value in our material landscape, juxtaposed with the prevailing devaluation. This is the reason why the eco-craft predominately focuses on using materials categorized as waste. The practice of craft, predicated on employing full attention, can open oneself up to the reality, and reorient our attention towards the built environment.

However, Murdoch's account of attention differs from Debus. Full attention alone is insufficient to disclose reality. This type of attention involves a distinction between 'accurate' and 'just' seeing. To have a just gaze, Holland argues, is to "[consider] the relevant background and other factors," contributing to the construction of reality.<sup>58</sup> Namely, it requires a gaze that acknowledges the embeddedness of the object in its multidimensional context, going beyond surface features to perceive it within a broader interconnected framework. Thus, a just gaze requires us to engage with the intricate layers of context that shape reality.

And this type of gaze, however, is equally necessary for excellent craftsmanship. Sennett posits that when one engages in good work, they "tend to focus on relationships...[deploying] relational thinking about objects".<sup>59</sup> To craft with excellence, one must recognize that the material will always escape one's initial ideas.<sup>60</sup> For example, when working with innertube material, it is essential to acknowledge its fluidity, resilience to alteration, and unique properties. Rather than imposing preconceived notions on the material, such in the case of treating it like leather, the craftsperson must adapt to its characteristics, working with the material rather than

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<sup>58</sup> Holland, 309.

<sup>59</sup> Sennett, 51.

<sup>60</sup> This connects with Vogel's ideas on wildness. Vogel contends that, "To build an object – *any* object – is to build something that always exceeds one's intentions, that always possesses something of the unpredictable and unknown about it," 112. Vogel defines this unpredictability as a gap between the intention of the builder, and the consequences of their making. The things we build always exceed the ideas we have in our heads, and so, to be a good builder or crafter is to accept and prepare for the wildness in materials.

imposing upon it. The more accurately and justly one perceives the material, the more refined the final product becomes, and the deeper one's understanding of craft grows.

Through these two perspectives on attention, I conclude that craft, whether through full attention or a just and loving gaze, serves as a powerful tool for reorienting our perception of the built environment. By engaging with tangible materials in an attentive manner, we not only shape our vision but cultivate different choices and attitudes towards the world we inhabit. Craft is an activity which speaks to both stories of alienation, albeit in different ways; it is not just about *creating* objects but *reimagining* the objects around us. Engaging with craft brings us nearer to reality through the physical practice itself, and the lessons that are learned. Though it may seem like a small activity, its impact is profound, offering the potential to redirect individuals away from the fantasy of alienation, and towards a deeper understanding of our environment.

#### **IV. Actions Taken**

In early 2023, my journey with this project began after a brief dalliance with pine needle basket making. I found inspiration in the act of crafting that basket, a fleeting moment of creativity that sparked a much larger idea. It wasn't until the end of the Summer of 2023 that a more refined version of an idea materialized: an eco-craft group. However, bringing this project to fruition seemed to require funding. In September, I applied for the Experiential Learning Scholarship at UM. Unfortunately, my application was rejected. Determined to proceed, I decided to trim down the craft options by asking myself a simple question: could the materials be easily and cheaply sourced? Any craft that did not meet the criteria was dropped. In the end, I was left with five crafts: homemade paper, tube-wallets, mosaic arts, pine needle basketry, and

journal making. Interestingly, the lack of funding ended up reinforcing the theme of accessibility. If I could personally provide supplies for the group, it emphasized that others could do the same.

The next step was to find a location for my events. In mid-January of 2024, I met with Elijah Kordieh Mensah, an M.S. Candidate in the Environmental Studies program and co-director of the Forum for Living with Appropriate Technology, also known as the UM Flat.<sup>61</sup> I pitched my project to Elijah, who took it back to the UM Flat team for group approval. They generously agreed to host my first three craft events in their on-site studio. The fourth craft, mosaic arts, was pitched to Christian Russell, the tool library manager at MUD, and he agreed to host that event later in the spring. The final craft, pine needle basketry, was planned to take place outside on the University's campus.

With the crafts chosen and the locations secured, my focus shifted to advertising. How could I introduce my eco-craft cabal into the world? I initially opted for a zine as the ideal medium. Using a zine for marketing felt appropriate, as it embodied the essence of craft, enticing readers to join the group. However, the zine didn't quite live up to my expectations. Like any crafts person, I sought out an alternative approach. Fortunately, I found my inspiration at the UM Seed Library – I decided to create faux seed packets, each containing a slip with craft dates and homemade paper embedded with wildflower seeds. It was a double offering: crafting potential and blooming flowers. As one would with seeds, I scattered them around campus and throughout Missoula. Yet, I soon realized my marketing was too inconspicuous for anyone to notice. I decided to whip up some posters and plaster them around campus and online before the first craft event.

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<sup>61</sup> Find more information about the UM Flat here, <https://umflat.wordpress.com/>.

What follows is a concise overview of each eco-craft meeting. It's worth mentioning that I had a two-week interval between each session to prepare for the next. During this time, I dedicated hours to sourcing and producing materials, as well as determining the format for each crafting session. Because of the demanding nature of planning a new craft every two weeks, I decided to remove mosaic arts from the lineup after the second meeting and postpone wallet making. This adjustment was necessary in order to ensure the quality and feasibility of each session.

On February 27<sup>th</sup>, the first eco-craft meeting took place at the UM Flat. The craft was papermaking and required the most materials out of the lineup. Crafting recycled paper requires bins, water, screens, blenders, and of course, used paper. Over the past six months, I had been collecting egg cartons and spare paper, but there were still some essential materials left to gather. Fortunately, I managed to find most of the bins from Home Resource and other secondhand shops in town. The screens needed for papermaking can be easily crafted from old picture frames, an industrial stapler, and plastic window screening. I made four sets of screens, in addition to two I already owned, therefore ending up with six screens and six bins altogether.

The main challenge for this craft was figuring out where participants would place their wet paper once it was made. Homemade paper tends to fall apart when wet, and so I needed to devise a solution that would allow ten or more people to make paper that I could then bring home to dry. I ended up borrowing some old sheets from a close friend and then cut them into long strips so participants could then fold their paper into stacks, separated by the sheet, as they made each sheet. We had a turnout of around twelve people, and each person created at least eight sheets of paper, with some doubling that amount depending on how they folded their sheet. With twelve people and only six stations for making paper, the space felt a bit crowded. Adding to the

challenge was the chilly temperature inside the studio space, which left our hands feeling frozen after dipping them into cold water. That said, everyone successfully created paper, which was the goal. To dry the paper, I took the stack of wrapped up paper back to my space and spent the next week drying out paper on large windows purchased from Home Resource. It took a total of seven days to completely dry all the paper.

After the first craft meeting, we delved into upcycled journal making, utilizing the paper we had created the previous week. During the break between sessions, I managed to effectively dry everyone's paper. However, anticipating that some attendees might not have had the chance to make paper themselves, I dedicated the second week to crafting twelve sheets of paper every day. Each batch of paper required nearly 24 hours to fully dry, so it was a slow-moving process. I owned some leather ready to be used, but I wanted to provide an alternative outlet given some people's aversion to using that material. And so, I sourced inner tubes to replace the leather and provided an example of a journal I had made using watercolors and hard stock paper. Therefore, the participants had three options: leather, innertubes, or water colored journal. Around eight people showed up for this event, and everyone walked away with a homemade journal. This event went much smoother than the previous.

The third craft session focused on upcycled innertube wallets and pouches. While most of my resources came from Home Resource, I also had the opportunity to connect with Donovan, the owner of the Tube Wallet Company, who generously provided additional tube material. Drawing from my extensive experience with leather crafting, I already had most of the necessary materials on hand. I dedicated some time to downloading beginner-friendly wallet patterns from the internet and created all the choices, so participants had visual guides for their creations. This

time, we had a smaller group with only five attendees, but each person was able to make at least one wallet or pouch.

The last craft session occurred on April 25<sup>th</sup> at the UM campus, and here participants learned how to harvest, prep, and begin coiling a pine needle basket. Over the past six months I had been collecting pine needles on my hikes but went foraging a few days prior to gather some extra materials. To prepare the pine needles, I had to freeze them, then soak them in boiling water, and soak them for twelve hours up until the event. I used the left-over bed sheets from the papermaking event to wrap the pine needles so that they would stay hydrated for the session. Pine needle basketry requires a gauge, which I created using straws I've collected over the past few weeks from my coffee purchases. The gauge is essentially a small tube that holds the pine needles together while they are stitched, and it helps maintain a consistent thickness in the pine needle coils. Some other materials that were required were needles, and wax thread, of which I had plenty of both. I had enough pine needles and materials for thirteen participants – I had twelve show up.

I began the event by taking the group across campus to gather underneath a large Ponderosa Pine tree. Here, I gave a brief presentation on how to correctly harvest pine needles, providing the participants with tips and tricks on what to look for while foraging. Then, I explained the process behind preparing pine needles for basket making (e.g., freezing, boiling, and soaking) and answered any questions related to the process. We departed from the Ponderosa Pine to the patio behind the Honors College building, and it was here that we began to craft the baskets. With twelve participants in attendance, I had to lead the session at a slower pace. Some of the participants were from the Missoula Weavers Guild, and they caught on quickly. Others, not so much. We completed the first few steps as a group, but once people began crafting at

different rates, the group instructional time fell away, and I began helping individuals one at a time. By the end of the event, everyone had, at the least, the foundation of the pine needle basket made. Most participants took their materials home, and I sent them with extra cordage to continue the process. Following the event, I sent out some resources to aid them in completing their basket. Overall, this event was very successful, and for some, this was their favorite craft session yet.

Some additional items completed for this CEP were a final presentation on May 3rd and an e-portfolio on the UM Philosophy website.

## **V. Accomplishments and Challenges**

Just as materials can be slippery and unpredictable, so is designing and stitching together a craft group. Reflecting on this experience, I would make some minor adjustments if given the opportunity to redo this project. The most salient challenge I encountered was my inability to facilitate an environmental discussion alongside the craft session. Being the only person familiar with crafting techniques, and responsible for guiding each participant through the process, I found it challenging to engage in environmental dialogue while leading the sessions. For instance, during the first event with just over ten participants, I found myself continuously moving between the various paper-making stations to ensure that everyone received the necessary instructions and assistance. This pattern persisted across all craft groups, for much of my time was dedicated to instructing and assisting participants with the craft at hand.

Considering I was the only individual with crafting experience, it is understandable why the sessions unfolded as they did. However, if the project were to be infused with more explicit philosophy, it should be targeted towards individuals who already engage in crafts rather than

those unfamiliar with the practice of making. It's possible that those who regularly work with crafts would require less introductory guidance, allowing for more time to explore the philosophical ideas presented in this paper. Hence, the first thing I would change about this project is the demographic I targeted in my marketing efforts.

While philosophy was not explicitly discussed, I firmly believe the virtue of this project lies in its inherent and implicit alignment with my overarching goals. Crafting can, and does, provide a platform to confront one's emotions; it serves as a form of meditation or therapy, often without initial recognition. Moreover, it has the potential to alter one's perceptions of the materials in the world, even without explicit acknowledgement. Personally, I did not consciously set out to perceive pine needles differently or to see roadside garbage as potential craft materials; rather, this shift in vision occurred naturally through the habitual practice of crafting. In other words, I did not need to talk about environmental philosophy to craft a better relationship with my local environment; and so, I could argue that my participants did not need this either. Yet, had I drawn out those threads more clearly in my craft sessions, my participants might have grasped the deeper significance behind this project.

Another challenge I encountered was marketing. I was unprepared for how challenging it is to self-promote an event, particularly when you have four of them to manage. While I'm satisfied with the turnout for my craft events, most attendees were often from the program rather than the community. If the original plan had been to invite those already involved in crafts, my demographic issue would have been resolved. Alternative advertising strategies could have included emailing my poster to specific groups, such as the Missoula Makers Collective, or asking to put the flyer at the Upcycled shop. For the pine needle basket session, I did end up posting the flyer on the Missoula Weavers Guild Facebook page, which garnered some interest,



suggesting that targeting a more specific demographic might have strengthened the project overall.

With all this considered, the foremost achievement lies in offering a free, accessible gateway for individuals to begin their crafting journey. As far as I'm concerned, this stands as the most notable accomplishment. Each participant walked away from the craft sessions with a personally crafted object in hand. Most of the materials utilized for this project were either rented from MUD, sourced from a second-hand store, or donated/found for free. Not only did my participants learn new crafts, but I also acquired new skills, including the creation of papermaking screens from old picture frames and innertube wallets. Such is the joy of crafting – it reveals itself as both accessible and a perpetually unfolding source of lessons.

As I transition from this project to new endeavors, I intend on continuing the eco-craft group wherever I go. I deeply believe that craft offers something that is ordinarily special – its simplicity is its greatest strength. It beckons us to slow down, providing a sanctuary from the turmoil of modern life, a space where we reconnect with ourselves, with each other, and with the world around us. Craft enables us to tap into a timeless tradition of making, where mundane materials are transformed into meaningful objects. Eco-crafts expand the horizons of what we perceive as “usable” materials, extending to the realm of garbage and waste. As we shape materials with intention and care, we are reminded of our inherent ability to *make* changes, one craft at a time. And so, as I embark on my new adventures, I carry with me the conviction that crafts are not just a hobby, they are a way of life. Not only do they enhance our perception of the world, but they have the potential to contribute to building a better world. To be a *good* environmental craftsfolk is to remember that making anything at all in a world full of stuff is a huge responsibility.

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