

**Make Work Use Art**



# MAKE WORK USE ART

Art as a Tool for Creating Change

HON211 UW 2021

HON211 University of Washington 2021  
Seattle



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This book was created by students in the winter 2021 course, HON211: The Politics and Practice of Making: Art as a Tool for Creating Change, taught by Teaching Professor Timea Tihanyi, School of Art + Art History + Design. This class, as all Honors courses at the University of Washington, offers an interdisciplinary approach to the course topic through research, practice, and discourse.

Twenty students from a wide variety of majors, including the sciences, humanities, health and medicine, as well as engineering, architecture, and design comprised our vibrant and engaged learning community. We started the quarter by imaginary visits to two important art schools, the German Bauhaus (1919-1933) and the Black Mountain College, located near Asheville, North Carolina (1933-1957). The students co-created participatory collaborative exercises based on the experiential learning principles developed by and practiced at these schools.

Throughout the course, we considered *craft* and *art* not as nouns, but as verbs, related the practiced maker's hand to the process aided by technological tools, and focused on the language of the materials, and the personal, cultural, historical narratives that they help to reveal. We contemplated how individual threads hold fabric together and transform that, and how individual narratives coalesce into larger histories that signify and bind together communities. We strived to explore and understand both the historical past and the innovative present and future by specifically focusing on needlework (sewing, embroidery, and quilts) during the 1920 and '30s (women suffrage movement), the 1970s

and '80s (second-wave feminism and queer rights movements, and the HIV/AIDS crisis), and in the present. We also considered how new technologies, such as parametric design and 3D printing, introduce new paradigms for solving problems, designing, producing, and using objects. Of course, the effect of technology was inescapable for us in our remote-learning Zoom classroom too, as it was for billions around the world during this global pandemic.

We made two projects. One, using needlework techniques and textile processes to tell a personal story of *Waiting*, and a second one, using Computer Aided Design (CAD) to create a *Time Capsule* which would be opened one hundred years from now. Throughout the quarter, the students researched a Bauhaus or Black Mountain College artist they had picked with the goal of reflecting on the artist's work, biography, creative process, and ideas about making by drawing parallels to those of their own.

In the following chapters, the students present their reflections. Individually, the essays and letters addressed to each historical artist are full of valuable information and great insights. Collectively, they are also a thoughtful and honest document of the moment: us, wrestling with the realignment of past, present, and future of why and how to make, how to find freedom within tradition, and how to reimagine a more conscientious making practice for ourselves and a more meaningful life for our objects.

### Land Acknowledgment

The University of Washington acknowledges the Coast Salish peoples of this land, the land which touches the shared waters of all tribes and bands within the

Suquamish, Tulalip and Muckleshoot nations. As students and faculty, we also recognize the need to express our gratitude to past, present, and future generations of Indigenous peoples for their ongoing stewardship of the land and waters.

Many thanks to UW Open Education librarian Lauren Ray for providing the class with guidance on the use of Pressbooks, and to Fine and Performing Arts librarian Madison Sullivan for the excellent research resources.

March 17, 2021



# 1

## KALEY ALDRICH ON MARY PARKS WASHINGTON

*Kaley M. Aldrich is a Senior studying English and Political Science at the University of Washington. She is the first in her family to attend college, and most of her work and writing includes reproductive rights discourse and law. In her free time, Kaley enjoys writing, politics, being with her dog, and creating music.*



Kaley Aldrich at the University of Washington Summer of 2019

*Mary Parks Washington (1924-2019) was an African-American fine artist. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, followed by a Master's degree in art from San Jose State. Washington studied at the 1946 Summer Art Institute at Black Mountain.<sup>1</sup> Washington is known for her histcollages—a form of collaging evoking the connection between individual and collective memory that historicizes pre-civil war cultural experiences<sup>2</sup>.*



Mary Parks Washington at Black Mountain College  
Summer of 1946

### ***Preface***

In a 2000 [oral history interview conducted by Connie Bostic](#),<sup>3</sup> Mary Parks Washington details her time at Black Mountain College. In this interview, Washington

1. Zommer, Cathryn Davis, and House, Neeley. *Fully Awake : Black Mountain College*. Academic Video Online: Premium. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources (DER), 2008.
2. Washington, Mary Parks. 2000. "‘Surrounded by Cellophane:’ Histcollages and Memories of Black Mountain College." *The Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* 11. <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/surrounded-by-cellophane-histcollages-and-memories-of-black-mountain-college-by-mary-parks-washington/>.
3. Washington, Mary Parks. 2000. "‘Surrounded by Cellophane:’ Histcollages and Memories of Black Mountain College." *The Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* 11. <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/surrounded-by-cellophane-histcollages-and-memories-of-black-mountain-college-by-mary-parks-washington/>.



discusses her experience as one of the only African American students at Black Mountain and how her histcollages reflect the individual and collective histories of similarly situated students and people of color. Most of this oral history explores the role of history, race, and memory, how life experiences develop the craft, and how her work represents a culmination of past, present, and future.

Like Washington, my life experiences and curiosities heavily influence my craft—be it writing, music, or visual art. I exist within the work whether I try to include me. I connect to Washington in her inclusion of time and how it runs together when your life decomposes molds set for your life. My creative background begins as a professional songwriter and country music artist, where I often explore my life and American history through song. After the 2016 election, I saw my path switch when I had to choose between a politically neutral career or fighting for justice. I chose the latter. Now I am here, merging my creativity, progressive agenda, and life experiences to fight for a more just world. I call my first project



Penumbral Existence by Kaley Aldrich

### *Penumbral Existence*

where I utilize traditionally feminine crafts to embroider women's unidentifiable faces, one camouflaged by others' existence. My second project uses CAD software to create what I imagine the conceptual [glass ceiling](#) where women remain trapped because patriarchy limits their mobility in public spaces. I intend to make

this final project much more personal. You know me for my progressive politics, my radically feminist disposition; however, you do not know me *that* well. Mary Parks Washington explores how Black Mountain, its people, and spaces influenced her; so, comparatively, I plan to do the same.

### ***A Letter to Mary Parks Washington***

Dear Mrs. Washington,

My name is Kaley. I am a musician, writer, and political nerd from Seattle, Washington studying English and Political Science at the University of Washington. I write this to you while mourning the recent death of my father. No, he was not a victim of COVID-19. In life, he was never a victim; however, death brings a different story.

Three years ago, his Multiple Myeloma began smoldering, and his physical condition worsened. I moved back to his home with my mom in my second year of college to care for him. My dad and I have always been close—from our late-night talks on the political state of the world to sitting in the passenger seat of his pickup truck licking an extra-large ice cream cone. I drove him to his doctor's appointments like he used to drive me to school in the morning when I was a little girl. He was my best friend, and everyone knew I was his favorite. Although I am biologically his granddaughter, he raised me and officially adopted me when I was eleven. He held my hand on my first day in the world, and I held his hand on his last.

On March 10th, at around seven at night, I closed the blinds in his hospital room. I turned around and watched as his belly stopped its slowing movements. His oxygen saturation and heart rate went undetectable. My mom (his wife of fifty years) panicked and asked, "What is happening?" I said, "I think he's gone," as I exited his private room to alert the nurses. I heard my mom scream, "Jim! No!" When I came back into the room, I saw my mom's body draped over my dad's, his breathing and heart rate resuming. My dad's eyes opened and investigated my mom's. They closed again, and he began falling into eternal sleep once more. I felt my body uncontrollably shake as tears started streaming down my face. I sat beside him, holding his left hand. I felt him squeeze it tightly as I told him it is okay if he goes, I would be okay and began singing his favorite song to him as his breathing slowed, heart rate stopped, and the flush of his skin tinted by his soul left his body. Not long after his death, my mom and I faced an unbearable number

of official documents needing our ballpoint signatures and hundreds of dollars from our bank accounts. This experience leaves me thinking about your project piece titled *Aunt Gussie*.<sup>4</sup>

In your description of [\*Aunt Gussie\*](#),

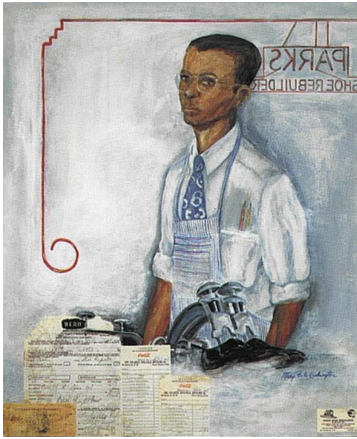
you write, “Aunt Gussie loved her umbrella and carried it rain or shine. Perhaps it was her shield of protection from the unhappy world in which she lived. Her focus was paying her weekly insurance policy and planning a fine funeral”<sup>5</sup>. In my experience and from



Aunt Gussie by Mary Parks Washington

what my dad always said, the only things certain in life are death and taxes. *Aunt Gussie* is an ageless reminder of everything, capturing the past, present, and future for those in the working class. My dad was devoted to his career as a lineman and crew chief at Seattle City Light, where he worked hard to ensure we had food on the table, a roof over our heads, college tuition for his children, and health insurance. On a similar note, I am a big fan of your piece

4. <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/surrounded-by-cellophane-histcollages-and-memories-of-black-mountain-college-by-mary-parks-washington/>
5. <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/surrounded-by-cellophane-histcollages-and-memories-of-black-mountain-college-by-mary-parks-washington/>



Savior of a Million Soles by Mary Parks  
Washington

*Savior of a Million Soles*,<sup>6</sup> where you feature your father, a successful businessman who “saved a million soles” with his shoe repair shop. Not only was your father a successful businessman, but he was a community leader and strong example for you and others around him.

Similarly, my father was a highly respected

and honorable man—so honorable that the city put his hard hat on display on a pole across the street from the Seattle City Light building on fourth avenue in Seattle. He did everything right when it comes to existing in a Capitalist society. Yet, his body was left in an ailing condition due to exposure to toxic environments while working. He sacrificed his life, health, and time for the City of Seattle, and the state of his body at the end of his life showed the damage; however, his soul and memory are ever more refined.

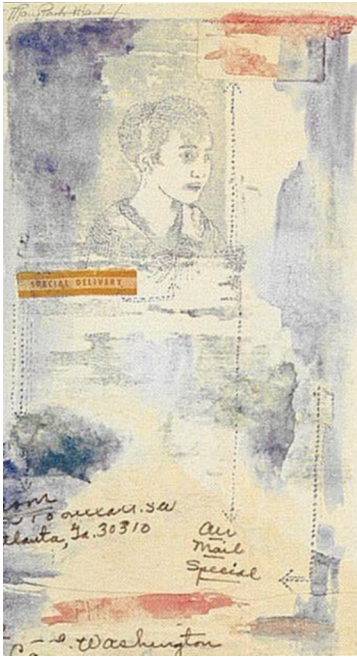
As the daughter of a blue-collar worker and the first in my family to attend college, my political dispositions are pro-union, increasing the minimum wage, and never crossing a picket line. When attending the University of Washington, I expected the institution to em

6. <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/surrounded-by-cellophane-histcollages-and-memories-of-black-mountain-college-by-mary-parks-washington/>

brace similar values. But much like your experience at Black Mountain, I feel suffocated by cellophane. Sure, I can stretch the bounds of this pseudo-liberal institution, but I would be unworthy of its support if I were to escape it. Therefore I best, to some extent, conform to its status-quo. Did you ever feel displaced around predominantly white folk raised by mostly white folk whose politics are liberal because they throw a leftist yard sign in the front yard of their million-dollar home in a gentrified neighborhood? I certainly have. I share your sentiment of not being too impressed by the “progressiveness” of a school like Black Mountain, suffocated by its ideology.



Me and Papa at my High School graduation in 2017.

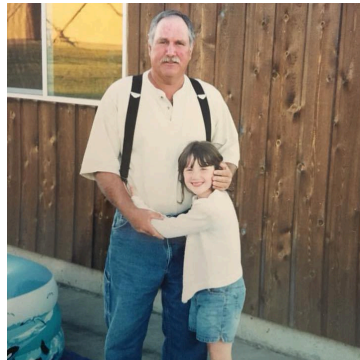


Surrounded by Cellophane by Mary Parks Washington

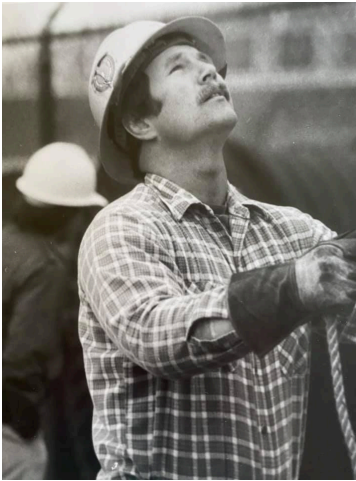
Was Surrounded by Cellophane inspired by your time at Black Mountain College and/or Spelman?

I learn more by observing everyday people. The stories my dad would tell me during our late-night chats were always the best. He told me about his mother and aunt, who turned him into a feminist, and how I have taught him how to be an even better, inclusive feminist.

My best lessons always came from him and sometimes my professors; however, when my life experiences began debunking historical facts being told by old white Ivy-educated men, Papa's knowledge comes first.



With Papa in Idaho in 2006



My dad on the job in the 1970s.

I will say that there is a difference when my educational spaces are filled with educators, researchers, and artists who come from diverse backgrounds. But the institutions themselves trap us with their privilege and crippling student debt, and we end up doing jobs we do not enjoy because it is what the economy demands at the time.

Did you ever feel the pressure to conform to the economy and subsequently told to stop creating?

While in the process of my two making projects this quarter, I view the history of art and making as creative acts publicly displaying the inner workings of the artist's consciousness. For me, my consciousness revolves around contemporary politics. Given the state of my mind, most of my art reflects reproductive justice and feminist ideologies. My first project titled *Penumbra Existence* finds inspiration in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*<sup>7</sup> and how wealthy and poor women exist different in the Republic of Gilead, and how women of color are non-existent in the eyes of the government. In *Penumbra Existence*, I utilize the historically feminine crafts of embroidery, creating the outlines of the women,

7. Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. 1st Anchor Books ed. New York: Anchor Books, 1998.



and macramé, creating the chain around their necks. My premise in making *Penumbra! Existence* is to contribute to the critical dialogue surrounding women's reproductive liberty in the United States Constitution. Similarly, in my second making project titled *The Glass Ceiling*, I used CAD technology to create a tangible incarnation of the theoretical glass ceiling where systemic patriarchy and white supremacy capsizes women's ability to exist equally with men because the system maintains stability from women's subordination.

My radical feminism and political consciousness do not simply stem from my desire to create a more just world, but from my experience of injustice in the world. I, like many women, am part of the 97% of women who experience sexual violence at some point during their lives. My rapist is a relative; however, my rapist is still a rapist. He is a white supremacist, loves Donald Trump, carved racist expletives into my car when I took him to court, and he thinks what he did to me should have no consequences. I am dedicated to including feminist and progressive political messaging in my art, writing, and disposition because sexism and racism are forever intertwined and emboldened by the system of white supremacy. The truth is, until we fully abolish the system of white supremacy; rape, sexism, and racism are going to exist as side effects that uphold this system. After reading your oral history, I assume your approach to art is similar in that it places your personally political dispositions into the atmosphere for a diverse digestion of discourse leading discussions on systemic dismantling.

The last thing I want to leave with you is that every piece of your art carries a political message. From *Aunt Gussie* to *Surrounded by Cellophane*, I am immediately met

by people affected by these politics. Through your inclusion of official documents, I am met with pieces to their puzzle as government documents often fall into telling their story's collective experience.

Thank you for blazing trails, dedicating your life to creating, and the knowledge your legacy carries on.

With sincerest regards,

Kaley

### Media Attributions

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- Kaley and Dad 2017 © Aldrich Family
- Surrounded by Cellophane © Mary Parks Washington
- Kaley and Dad 2006 © Aldrich Family
- Jim at Seattle City Light circa 197? © Kathleen Johnson

# 2

## CLAIRE BILLMAN ON STAN VANDERBEEK

*Claire Billman is a Global Public Health and Interdisciplinary Honors student with plans to become a Physician Assistant. Outside of the classroom, she is passionate about researching [SynGAP-1](#), a rare mosaic mutation that impacts neurological development, and connecting families impacted by it. Her favorite medium to use is film and she has a personal goal to become a great home chef.*

*Stan VanDerBeek (January 6, 1927- September 19, 1984) was an American painter turned filmmaker who studied at Copper Union and Black Mountain College. He had a long*

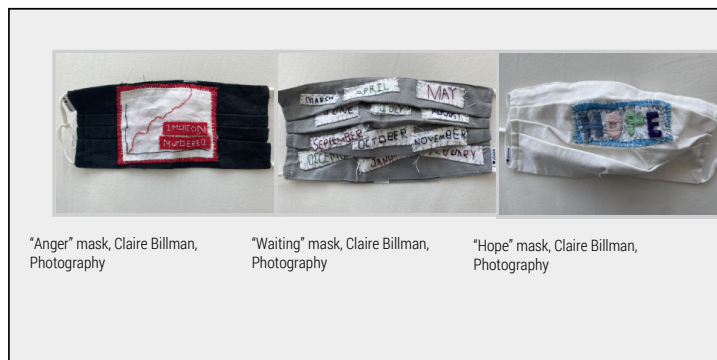
*and diverse art career that was focused on experimentation and incorporated many mediums.*

## Hello Mr. VanDerBeek,

The world today is extremely different from the world that you knew!

Technology, such as personal computers and 3D printers, are no longer reserved for top government agencies and technical Universities. Lasers can fit into your pocket and entire films can be created solely on cellular phones. Additionally, we are currently living through a global pandemic. For the past year, our lives have centered around technology and the internet.

In fact for a recent project that I completed titled, "Cycles" I drew inspiration from the pandemic and used embroidered masks to express the emotions that I have felt waiting for it to be over. Below are photos of the masks that I used. The black one represents anger, the white one hope, and the gray is a combination of the two.



It found that I was not able to completely and fully express my message with just textiles alone and as a result

incorporated a film aspect. I felt that filming the movement and application of my masks would resonate better with the audience and combine multiple mediums. Additionally, due to the pandemic today more than ever before, cameras and videography allow us to share stories, communicate, and fill the time. I believe you once went as far as to say that film is “the most total media”<sup>1</sup> and I agree.

### ***The Reinvention of Happenings***

I did not have a plan while creating and was freestyling in how I wanted to express my emotions. In fact, I just started recording and experimented with different movements and angles. In my video which can be found [here](#), you can see the final version of my experimentation.

After some reflection, I now realize how this filmed performance is more similar to a happening than a scripted story. Every move I made inspired the creation of my next moves. I think I did not initially consider my film as a happening because the experience of watching a video is so different than an in-person performance. Specifically, what we see in a film is a decision that the creator made. We see what they want us to see. During an in-person performance, like a happening, you see it all and can choose where you want to look. The viewer makes a choice.

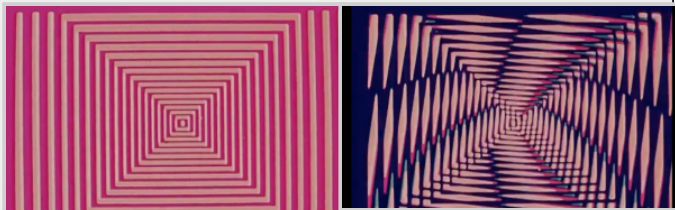
When considering if my film counted as a happening, I drew upon your time at Black Mountain College for guidance. Specifically when you started filming happenings. To me, those videos and my own film are a kind of digital happening. Additionally, I noticed that

1. Stan Vanderbeek: The Computer Generation Part 1. YouTube. YouTube, 1972. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mg\\_DowyLuT8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mg_DowyLuT8).

many of your other films capture similar themes traditional to happenings.

Your films are full of seemingly random and organic creations. As I previously mentioned, films are very limited in that the creator determines what the audience is supposed to see. However, with your use of visual effects, you are able to create the feeling that the viewer could choose what they would pay attention to. I first noticed this in your short film "[Moirage](#)". Specifically, your constant manipulation of the visual felt like I was looking through a digital kaleidoscope. Even while I was rewatching it for the 2nd time I noticed elements that I hadn't previously seen. This felt similar to the chaotic and overwhelming happenings that took place at Black Mountain College as there were too many things going on for the viewer to be able to absorb it all. For example, I failed to notice that you essentially go through the same progression of effects two "scenes" in a row.

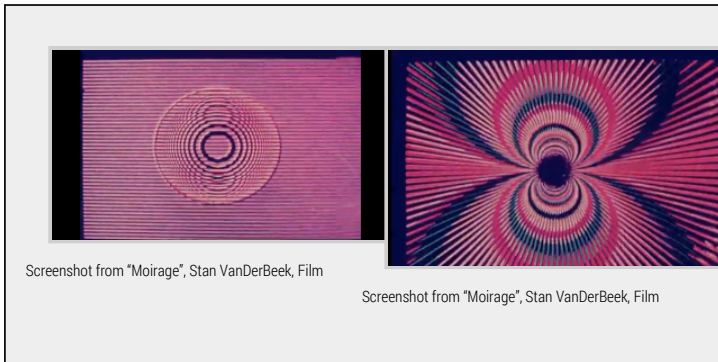
#### Initial scene



Screenshot from "Moirage", Stan VanDerBeek, Film

Screenshot from "Moirage", Stan VanDerBeek, Film

#### Subsequent scene



I think that the techniques and the almost “trippy” feeling of the special effects made the feeling of choice possible. I will definitely have to experiment on my own to understand this better!

### **Digital Crafting**

The Italian Futurist went as far as to say that “performance art was the only way to reach a mass audience”<sup>2</sup>.

Given this statement was made prior to the rise of the internet I think it is worth considering the role that performance art plays today. I would argue that today performance art is dependent on film if it wants to reach a large audience. Even more, it was the combination of film, the internet, and performance art that changed the definition of a “mass audience”.

A prime example of this is the Social Media app TikTok. Essentially TikTok is a platform anyone can sign up for and post videos to. An algorithm will then decide

2. The Art Assignment. PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, 2016. <https://www.pbs.org/video/the-case-for-performance-art-p8suli/>.

which videos a certain user will enjoy. Applications like TikTok and other social media platforms gave rise to the idea of viral videos. Essentially the creation of viral content is centered around making something that will be shocking, heartfelt, or unique enough that everyone will want to see it. Since viral videos can get MILLIONS of views, shape pop culture, and give their creator fame, many people desire to create such content. You were right in saying that computers serve as a tool to amplify the thoughts of the creator! It is interesting to consider how digital crafting today has strayed from the traditional definition of crafting. More specifically the inspiration of crafting using social media platforms has “emphasized output, not input”<sup>3</sup>.

When you compare the creation of TikTok content to some of your work it is interesting to consider how the audience plays a role. By that I mean if you are going to make different content a piece is reaching 1 million people vs. 15. Over the past quarter, I have been able to experiment with this. For my film “[cycles](#)” I was creating a video for 20 people who have a background understanding of happenings and art. Knowing that my audience would notice the small choices I made inspired and challenged me. I paid more attention to my movements and the unspoken message I was conveying. I felt that I could be more authentic and had more overall creative freedom.

In addition to creating my film “Cycles”, I was also assigned to make a [TikTok PSA](#) for a different class. The creation of my TikTok felt very different. The main goal

3. McCullough, Malcolm. 1996. *Abstracting Craft: the Practiced Digital Hand*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.  
[abstracting\\_craft\\_mccullough-1.pdf](#)



I had for this video was to create content that everyone would understand. I knew that if I wanted my video to be picked up by the algorithm that I would have to follow a certain style of video. Because of this, I used a popular sound, hashtags, and even changed the pitch of my voice so it came across as more feminine and welcoming. I made these choices not because I was inspired to do so, but felt it was necessary for the platform.

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### **Innovation of Self**

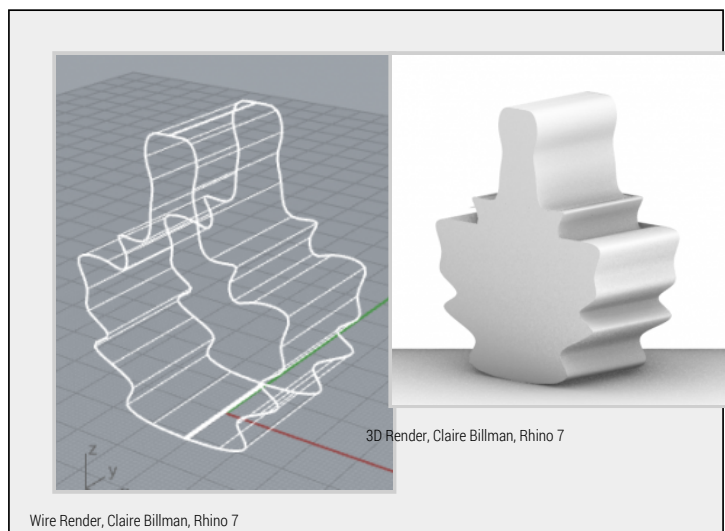
While our access to technology has changed radically from when you were experimenting with it, the technical skills to use it continue to be a barrier. Just as you commented on and exercised, collaboration continues to be the main way to reduce this barrier and is necessary when using new technologies.

However, I found that my understanding and use of collaboration were different from your experience. Specifically, when you spoke of collaboration I believe you meant more of a mode of creation of new technology. During this you would collaborate with numerous engineers and would eventually end up with your own artwork and the engineer would have a new program. This process would be rooted in creativity and like a happening, structured in the understanding that every move you make inspires the next.

Unlike when you spent time at NASA and MIT we no longer need to consult a scientist to learn a new program. In fact for a project that I recently did, I was able to learn a completely new computer program from videos that everyday people uploaded to the internet. The rise of the internet and sharing platforms has allowed for more collaboration than ever before. Yet, most of the

collaboration occurring is not human to human, but rather human knowledge uploaded to servers that are then accessed by other computers. Thus the element of personalization and the organic creative process between artists has declined.

My recent project used a program called Rhino, which essentially makes 3D objects that can eventually be 3D printed. I have added a photo of my creation known as “The Real MacCoy” to give you a better idea of what I’m talking about.



I had never used this program before but had a very specific vision for what I wanted to create. I now realize that I had such a specific vision for my project since I knew how limited my technical skills were. I felt equipped to be creative while brainstorming since it didn’t require any additional knowledge unlike when I used Rhino.

To gain the necessary knowledge to use Rhino I watched videos on a website known as Youtube. I felt like

I was able to gain access to a new tool and knowledge, but its transactional nature did not feel like an authentic collaboration. In a way, it felt like an exchange of goods where the commodity was knowledge.

Upon further reflection, I have realized that much of my school experience has felt like this. For some context, I am currently studying to become a Physician Assistant. Due to my major, most of the knowledge I am learning is from other people's experiments and not my own. Additionally, the classroom is centered around my professors and we are tested on how well we are able to absorb their knowledge of a subject. This is very different from your time at Black Mountain College! As you know the living and learning community was very equalizing and centered around personal experimentation. The teachers learned from their students which highlights the notion that everyone had something to offer.

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### **Man-Machine Relationship**

You were right in that the relationship between Man and Machine was going to change the way we communicate with one another. Due to the pandemic, any unnecessary human interactions have moved online, and the only way I see human faces without masks on is through video calls.

Pandemic aside, the rise of this relationship has changed the quality of human relationships. I agree with you that computers serve as a tool to amplify the thoughts of the creator. However, I don't think you could have foreseen the extent to how this tool would also amplify human biases and polarize the world. In your manifesto, you began to consider the general idea of how a man would lose his way as his relationship with

machines intertwined<sup>4</sup> but I'm afraid it's worse than you could have foreseen.

TikTok is just one of many internet-based applications, known as social media platforms, that use algorithms to personalize the experience the user has. In a way, this is kind of like your idea of the audience having control over the viewing experience of a film. However, the algorithm used on these platforms takes away the element of human choice by playing into the human reward pathways. As a result, people are only seeing what the computer thinks they want to see. This is both highly addictive and creates echo chambers of thought that are highly manipulated and polarizing.

This idea of a limited or obscured view is not unique to social media platforms. We have already discussed how film inherently limits what the audience can see, and can be manipulated into creating a false narrative. With the rise of viral videos comes the rise in the consumption of manipulated content. It is the combination of the rise of manipulated content along with algorithm-based echo chambers that have contributed to the extreme polarization around the world.

On January 6th, 2020 a line in your manifesto came true when a domestic terrorist group attacked the United States Capital. You said, "man is running the machines of his own invention... while the machine that is man... runs the risk of running wild"<sup>5</sup>. The algorithm that gave rise to the polarization in the U.S. was a man-made creation which, in turn, made men attack one another.

4. UbuWeb Film & Video: Stan VanDerBeek. Estate of Stan VanDerBeek, 2008. <https://www.ubu.com/film/vanderbeek.html>.

5. UbuWeb Film & Video: Stan VanDerBeek. Estate of Stan VanDerBeek, 2008. <https://www.ubu.com/film/vanderbeek.html>.

Since then conversations surrounding our relationship with technology have shifted into how we can begin to control it.

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As you can see the world today is very different from when you left it. Nevertheless, there is still plenty of exploration, creation, and reflection to be done! I hope you enjoyed hearing about the relevance and purpose your work still serves today!

Talk to you soon.

Claire Billman

---

References

# 3

## CASEY CHEN ON GUNTA STÖLZL

*Casey Chen is receiving her B.S. in Chemistry in March, 2021 from the University of Washington. Her current research is on mass spectrometry in biological systems, and she is planning on attending graduate school to pursue her Ph.D. in Analytical Chemistry.*



*Gunta Stölzl<sup>1</sup> (1887 – 1983) was a German textile artist and weaver. She was one of the only female masters of the Bauhaus and head of the weaving workshop from 1926 to her dismissal due to political pressures.*

Gunta Stölzl was one of the few female Bauhaus masters and eventually became the head of the weaving school. Her work transformed weaving's overall connotation from a "woman's work" to a more respected art form. As a master, she was able to transform complex ideas and patterns in textiles to upholstery, wall hangings, suit materials, and table cloths. All of which contain some functional aspect. The merging of different materials in many of her pieces (wool, silk, cellophane, etc.) demonstrates an immense amount of technical prowess.

As a master, Stölzl placed a lot of emphasis on the

1. Aloni, Ariel. Gunta Stölzl, [www.guntastolzl.org/](http://www.guntastolzl.org/).

functionality of textiles, with her experimentation of different fabrics, such as cellophane and synthetic fibers. For example, in the following chair she had created in collaboration with Marcel Beuer, the woven textile is simple and yet structurally sound and functional. As a master, she was able to transform complex ideas and patterns in textiles to upholstery, wall hangings, suit materials, and table cloths. All of which contain some functional aspect. The merging of different materials in many of her pieces (wool, silk, cellophane, etc.) demonstrates an immense amount of technical prowess. A large majority of her work embodies the idea of functionality with aesthetics. This coincides with the Bauhaus's emphasis on industrialization and primary shapes, as well as the beginning of modernism.



Marcel Breuer and Gunta Stölzl, The Colorful Weave Chair, 1921, pear wood and woolen straps



In one of her letters titled “The Development of the Bauhaus Weaving Workshop”<sup>2</sup>, Stözl writes that “They [woven fabrics] have to serve their “purposes”, have to be integrated, and have to fulfill with ultimate precision the requirements we place on colour, material, and texture”. Her emphasis on functionality reflects the Bauhaus’s approach of the unity of mass production with aesthetics.

### **Aesthetics vs. Functionality and Gender**

In my own design and artistic experience, I have personally placed more emphasis on pure aesthetics. Weaving and embroidery are merely hobbies for me and a way to add color and interest to textiles in my own life, so of course I may not have much expertise in terms of making functional objects. As a personal example, my midterm project for the course, “Waiting”, was created through embroidery designs and stitching onto N-95 masks used during the 2-week quarantine between me and my roommate. This work was largely aesthetic – as the stitching from the needle and the holes created render the masks useless for the purposes of preventing respiratory droplets from travelling, which is a stark reversal when compared to her work. I transformed something functional into something useless and ineffective through my art, whereas she did the reverse.

### [Waiting](#)

While my leisurely art project cannot compare directly to the work that Gunta Stözl was doing during her tenure, it speaks to the different emphasis and privilege of being able to choose between the two – aesthetics versus functionality, bringing me to the main topic I want to touch on in this essay. Specifically, the privilege of

2. Martin, Linnea Sue. Essay. In *The History and Development of the Bauhaus Weaving Workshop, 1919-1933*, 1976.

choice and the necessity of functionality due to weaving's connotation as "woman's work".

The Bauhaus was advertised as a revolutionary, modernist institution where the ideals of mass production and a new era of design were discussed, but its stances and policies as an institution in regard to gender was still extremely traditional and conservative. Despite the intricacies involved in weaving – the interlocking threads, patterns, and colors, weaving itself as an art form was never quite respected as more traditionally "high standard" art forms, such as painting, sculpting, etc. During Gunta Stözl's residency and tenure at the Bauhaus, weaving was transformed into an art form that was not only aesthetically pleasing, but also industrial and practical. Her time at the Bauhaus and as head of the weaving workshop became one of the school's largest sources of income. However, her contract's salaries and other terms still paled when compared to the benefits of her male colleagues. This blatant and not really subtle discrimination in wages and benefits speaks to the pervasive sexism of the time and was carried down from earlier times.

I think it is also extremely important to speak to the fact that Gunta Stözl is the "token" woman master of the Bauhaus, and even that position was met with an enormous amount of resistance. Her initial tenure was only 3 months. The fact that she was the only female master and that no other female was promoted to a similar position or given many opportunities outside of the weaving school emphasizes the rarity of her promotion. There is no doubt to me that the Bauhaus as an institution likely used the fact that they had one

woman master to justify that they were not a discriminatory institution.

Women were also confined to the weaving department and commonly served as models for other artists, thus the role and extent of her work might have been severely limited due to the institutionalized misogyny and sexism. I have had the ability to choose my art and making process in ways that would not have been possible back in the Bauhaus era. Largely, my artwork can just be seen and judged by its merits, the technicality, the skillset, and the message it sends. I have the privilege of using any medium without harsh judgement (mostly) from the larger society about whether or not my art is really considered “art”. However, when women were confined to only the weaving school and denied access to the remaining art forms in the Bauhaus, it is difficult to imagine the other artistic mediums that were taken away. Between aesthetics and functionality in this context, there doesn’t seem like there is much of an incentive to produce artwork that is based purely in aesthetics.

### **Femininity and Status**

My main question that came up when learning about Gunta Stözl’s work and life is this: How much of her own distinction and emphasis on the functionality and technicality came from wanting the art form of weaving to be disconnected from femininity in order to elevate its status?

Perhaps none of it had been intentional and purposeful, and perhaps she had never thought too much of her role as a woman and was just happy to produce artwork. However, looking at her work from a modern feminist view, I am grappling with the implications of her being confined to the medium of weaving and her own

technical prowess and ability. Her affinity for weaving and her incorporation of geometry as well as functionality are defining and unique. Specifically, her use of jacquard weaving, which was commonly associated with industrial mass production of textiles. However, when she first started her studies, she had studied the more traditional art form of painting. There is no doubt in my mind that whether intentional or not, the work that Gunta Stözl had done and her transformation of textiles elevated its status due to the disconnect from traditional feminine embroidery and weaving.

The idea of femininity is complicated and nuanced. The desire of disconnection from femininity is largely due to the direct connotation of negativity with femininity. This applies to the arts in the form of weaving seen as a largely feminine art form and the fact that females were entirely confined to the weaving workshop at the Bauhaus.

In my own work, I have often struggled with the idea of femininity, specifically in the sciences. For some reason, due to the influx of women learning and studying biology, it has somehow become increasingly perceived as a “soft science”, i.e. a different way to invalidate largely female dominated academic areas. I have often resented and avoided going into fields that are largely female dominated, as that typically represents less job opportunities, less pay, and less room for promotion. It’s an interesting and depressing parallel between the women in the weaving workshop at the Bauhaus – largely female dominated areas and little to no opportunities.

### **A “Woman’s Work”**

Gunta Stözl's work and her role in transforming weaving from just a "woman's work" through the incorporation of functionality and design was monumental.

Today, our society continuously devalues any work or field that is largely female dominated. From school teachers in the US to doctors in Russia. The profession itself doesn't matter, as long as it is oversaturated with women, it is not as respected. There are fundamental issues with the concepts of societal femininity and the exploitation of women workers. In the current day, large parts of our capitalist society rely on the exploitation of people that are undervalued in society – immigrants, undocumented people, BIPOC, etc.

An exhibition by the textile artist Ahree Lee<sup>3</sup> describes the issue in more complexity and clearness than I can – she explores the idea of what a woman's work is through weaving the statistics of women in STEM on tapestries. As she describes, "Weaving and computing differ in their gender associations and value of labor. [...] Textile production drove technological advances from prehistory through the industrial revolution. Yet, the history of textile production is also a history of how women and those without power were exploited for economic gain."

3. Lee, Ahree. "Ahree Lee." Women's Center for Creative Work. WCCW, 2019. <https://womenscenterforcreativework.com/ahree-lee/>.



Ahree Lee, 2019, cotton and linen yarn

Our idea of a “woman’s work” is still pervasive in society. While historical figures like Gunta Stözl’s personal ideals and work should be viewed in context of her history, it is rather disturbing to me to see the still persistent parallels between her life as an undervalued master of the Bauhaus to the modern woman in society, including myself.

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# 4

## SARAH CRUMRINE ON JOHANNES ITTEN

*Sarah Crumrine studies Environmental Science and Resource Management and is part of the University Interdisciplinary Honors program. She is interested in natural resource conservation and the complex issues of how humans relate to and are supported by ecosystems. Additionally she is a maker; using sewing and practical craft forms for creative expression.*

*Johannes Itten (1888–1967) was a Swiss painter. He was an elementary school art teacher before joining the Bauhaus as a Master of Form; he developed the preliminary course which selected and instructed all students.*

## Introduction

To bring insight to students who wish to follow the lessons of Johannes Itten, I will explore his movement and spiritual practices to find their merits and meaning. The connection between body and mind is key to Itten's theory that breath, movement, and diet can purify the body and facilitate new artistic discoveries in color and form, yet the underlying belief is suspect. Inspired by Itten's color exercises, I developed an experiment of my own to reflect upon what can be gained through the linking of movement and making, and I present how an improved version of Itten's process of making could benefit students alike.



## Part I. The Theory and Background of Movement and Making

### Itten's Influence on the Bauhaus

Teaching across multiple workshops, the painter Johannes Itten introduced bodily movement practices rooted in Mazdaznan spirituality to his teaching<sup>1</sup>. Course topics included form and color, along with Mazdaznan rhythmic exercises, breathing patterns, and meditation.

Students participated in activities to coordinate artistic movement with physical movement for “the cultivation of a healthy rhythm”<sup>2</sup>. Rhythmic



Portrait of Johannes Itten, Paula Stockmar, photography

1. Moore, Padraic E. “A Mystic Milieu.” *bauhaus imaginista*, 2018. Accessed March 1, 2021 <http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/2210/a-mystic-milieu>.
2. Burchert, Linn. “The Spiritual Enhancement of the Body: Johannes Itten, Gertrud Grunow, and Mazdaznan at the Early Bauhaus.” In *Bauhaus Bodies: Gender, Sexuality, and Body Culture in Modernism’s Legendary Art School*, edited by Elizabeth Otto and Patrick Rössler, 49–72. Visual Cultures and German Contexts. New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019. Accessed March 1, 2021. <http://dx.doi.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.5040/9781501344817.ch-003>.p. 50.

drawing and breathing were practiced to provide consciousness, life, and health, in contrast with irregular, arrhythmic movements that could harm as severely as death<sup>3</sup>. Itten linked invisible mental function with outward physical signs, and that concept appears in more and more modern health and exercise practices.

Itten's goal to engage the body physically before creating art aimed to strengthen spiritual connections; his influence was described as creative liberation by some and brainwashing by others. Ultimately, students emerged with a common vocabulary in color and form, armed with a tool kit of routines to get their creative juices flowing. On a surface level, no part of this seems harmful, and yet I am critical of the Mazdaznan belief and overly-strict routines.

I wonder if Itten and those who promote strict regimes today may have an outsized influence due to the importance we place on 'expert training'. The general public is eager to learn about the behaviors, beliefs, or systems that exist in that 'successful' person's life to guide them to fame and mastery, because then we can consider what they provide for the practitioner and if they would give us the same effect. But in the case of Itten, the roots of Mazdaznan inspire racism and genocide, so his practices must be approached with caution. Likewise, modern wellness practices can have a harmful side when taken to an extreme.

### Criticism of Spiritual and Wellness Regimes

For as much good as movement and spirituality can bring to the arts, it is entirely possible for wellness efforts to

go too far. In the case of Mazdaznan, early literature expresses ideas of racial superiority and anti-Semitism. For an individual to be considered ‘clean’, an example of what is ‘dirty’ must exist. German research historian Ulrich Linse identifies the danger of the cleansing as that “Mazdaznan self-reform always had racial refinement as a larger goal”<sup>4</sup>. When the point of the movement is no longer just to improve the individual, but rather shift society toward one side and flatten out any spikes of diversity, a toxic system has been created.

There are dark sides to both Itten’s inclusion of physical and spiritual practices in his teaching, just as modern health and wellness movements have their own pitfalls. Both can have unfortunate intentions; the Mazdaznan philosophy on which Itten based his techniques sought to achieve a purer, whiter race, while modern health and diet movements can present unattainable ideals and mask restrictive or obsessive habits. In my own experience of dance, an emphasis on thin, white bodies is harmful in a similar way to Mazdaznan doctrines that excluded Jews and darker skinned people in pursuit of purity.

I think that the similarity between these two issues is an overemphasis on cleanliness with detrimental effects of obsession and categorization. The obsession gives the practitioner a sense that their controlling view is the *only* way to see the world. And the categorization casts the food, bodily movements, and mindsets of the world in two types: good and bad without accounting for context

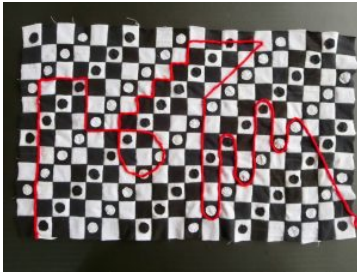
4. Linse, Ulrich. “Johannes Itten and the Bauhaus”. Bauhaus imanginista, Accessed March 1, 2021 <http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/4787/johannes-itten-and-mazdaznan-at-the-bauhaus>

or emotional aspects of the choices people make. This can lead to attack on the self or others, and lead to harm—not creativity. I am unsure why Itten would have been so drawn to this ideal of cleanliness if it washes away the variety of the world that supports creativity.

### **My Own Relation to Movement Practices**

I see the effect of breath and movement on the creative mind as a soothing of anxiety and preparation for deeper thinking. Modern society promotes a lack of awareness of where the body is in the world and how the body can calm the mind and vice versa. Focusing on such a simple thing as breath can help a person refocus and set an intention that will channel their energy into the task at hand. Likewise, feeling how the muscles and bones of the body can flow opens up the possibilities for the actions they can take, which is directly tied to the physical action of making art. In these two ways, it is logical for breath and movement to be warm-up activities in art education. My personal connection to warm-up activities is in classical ballet, where rhythmic and repetitive movement eased me into creative expression, but I will now reflect on other ways I have incorporated movement into my making.

## Examples of My Own Art Education &amp; Making Practices

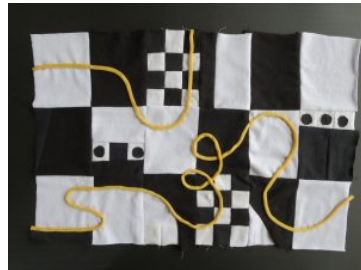


Sarah Crumrine, Red Thread, cotton fabric piecework

Over the course of the past 9 weeks, I have considered movement in relation to my own making to an increasing degree. The idea for my textile project came to me while running; I was breathing hard in sync with the beat of my feet hitting the trails. The

idea that I developed reflected that rhythm and energy that I was feeling, and this mood was also present in the making process itself.

Over and over I sewed squares to squares to squares and then many circles on top, the patterns and motions of cutting, sewing, pressing not unlike an exercise regime. I felt a benefit from movement in both the ideation and



Sarah Crumrine, Yellow Thread, cotton fabric piecework

actualization of my project that is visible in the final pieces. Atop patterned backgrounds that convey structure and regime, there are meandering lines of color that suggest freely moving forward. The dual nature of waiting being something that I want to be over as quickly as possible, but also make use of is accompanied by a duality between movement being for the physical health and emotional or mental wellbeing.

In a class discussion, my peers identified the needle as an actor engaging in rhythmic and repetitive motions between cloth and thread<sup>5</sup>.

This contributes to the overall feeling that sewing is meditative; it is a very physically-involved making practice that demands full attention from the mind to execute the creative plan. Little space is left in the mind for doubt or nervousness or apprehension because the process is immersive. Austin Kennedy writes on the role of rhythm in the work of Karen Karnes, see [his chapter](#) for a brief mention of rhythmic maker practices.

In this way, hand sewing becomes a practice that is more than just production of a textile, similar to how Itten's lessons went beyond the mathematical combination of pigments to achieve certain colors. When the making practice becomes a full body experience, other makers are invited to join in. We see this in historical traditions of quilting; from quilting bees of the 1800s to small gatherings in the 1980s to assemble the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt<sup>6</sup>. People form community when they engage with the meditative practice of making and are better able to value their own creative ideas and those of others, ultimately resulting in deeper artistic practice. And whether alone or in groups, the movement itself adds another aspect to the final creation.

In contrast, increasingly digitized forms of art are reducing the hands-on nature of crafts like ceramics and sculpture. Instead they replace the muscle with the algorithm, allowing advantages like “rapid, incremental,

5. UW Students. “HON211 Needle.docx” Accessed March 7, 2021

6. Bryan-Wilson, Julia, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*. University of Chicago Press, 2017.

reversible, physical actions on the object; and immediately visible results”<sup>7</sup> which arguably make art more accessible so long as the artist has a computer and the requisite software. What comes of this making in the absence of movement is not static, lifeless art, which supports an argument that it is not the physical movement of the body making art that gives it dynamic qualities (as I suggested in relation to my textile project). Instead, digital craft demands movement of the mind and the execution of rhythmic computing; digital design specialist McCullough describes the character of this mental movement: “you become able to execute tightly synchronized combinations...you may feel some intellectual agility...the habit of identifying patterns.”<sup>8</sup>. In conclusion, the physical touch and awareness of traditional craft cannot be simulated and thus will endure in the world of making.

7. McCullough, Malcolm. *Abstracting Craft: The Practiced Digital Hand*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997, pp. 312.

8. McCullough, pp. 314.

## Part II. An Experiment of Movement and Making

### Itten's Color and Form Exercises



Johannes Itten, Kleurenleer, paint on paper

Starting with finding the harmonies and contrasts in color duos, Itten adds more colors and more shades into his lessons, until he reaches the twelve-pointed color wheel. His method used pieces of colored paper, paint pigments, or colored threads to calibrate the eyes, to improve perception of color, and perfect the artist's

ability to compose and pair colors<sup>9</sup>.

### Personal Experiment in Itten's Exercises

My relation to color is that I love it! Surrounded by bright, contrasting posters, I have several 'test' paintings hanging in my room. Though I want to try new combinations, I don't want to make a mistake, so I am hesitant to try out new combinations on nice paper, because I don't want to ruin it. And yet, I love how my



Sarah Crumrine, Wall Painting, acrylic on brown paper

9. Itten, Johannes. *The Elements of Color*. Edited by Faber Birren. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1970. p. 65.

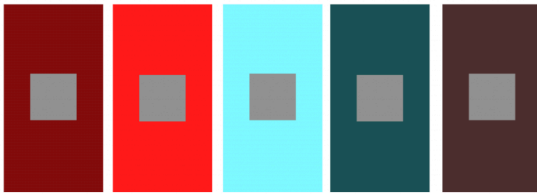


‘tests’ come out, so I challenge myself to make experimentation part of the real process instead of a preparation piece that doesn’t get exposed.

Over the course of three days, I will be conducting an experiment to test the benefit of various exercises performed before doing Itten’s color exercises drawn from a shortened, English version of the artist’s text *The Elements of Color*. I will do 20 to 30 minutes of activity: walking, running, and Pilates, performing the color exercise in a digital painting app immediately afterwards until I notice some interesting phenomena.

### Color study I

Wednesday 9am, **walking** for 23 minutes,  
feeling confident



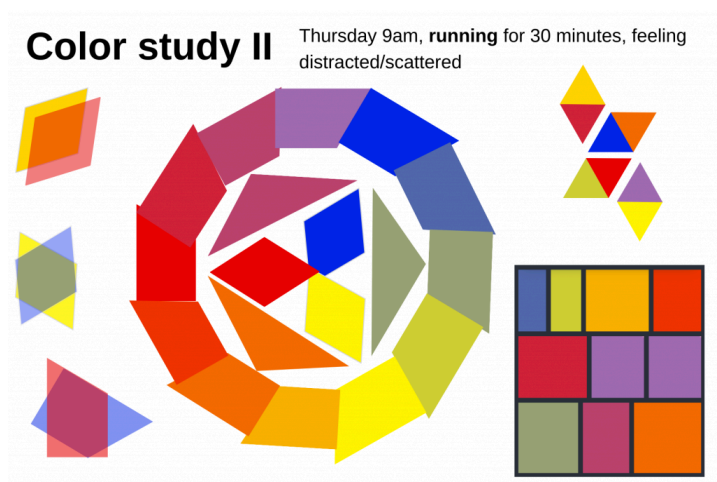
Sarah Crumrine, Color Study I, digital

Inspired by the gray exercise<sup>10</sup>, I created 5 different colored panels with the same gray square in the center of each one, to study how the surrounding color changed the appearance of the gray. I chose two reds and two blues, with a lighter and darker version of each, and then one blend of the darker red and darker blue. I saw how on the brighter backgrounds (second and third from left) the gray appeared darker, while on three darker colors, the gray square appears lighter in comparison to the same gray on the corresponding brighter background. Itten’s analysis of this exercise references ‘simultaneous

10. Itten, 20.

contrast' which suggests that the gray "seems tinged with its complementary" because our eyes prefer to perceive a contrasting relationship<sup>11</sup>.

Another visual effect I noticed were the gray squares' perceived depth; on the brighter colors, the squares floated, while on the darker backgrounds, they receded and seemed to be cut-outs to a lighter background. This exercise was a joy to start off with.



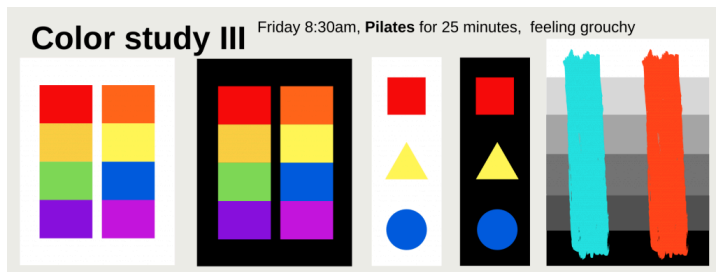
Sarah Crumrine, Color Study II, digital

Next I tried making a color wheel. My results were rings of well-coordinated secondary and tertiary colors derived from the center trio, however the relationship between the outer twelve and inner trio was lacking. This was probably due to my mixing method—by stacking transparent polygons and screenshotting the result—making all derived colors more muted and gray. I thought that because of this change, the tertiary colors

11. Itten, 19.

then paired better with themselves and especially on a dark background (as shown in the bottom right) but I did try pairing a tertiary purple with a primary yellow (upper right). My largest struggle was combining the blue and yellow into green. Just as Itten says it's "no easy task to obtain secondaries by mixture"<sup>12</sup>, I noticed that the composite of blue and yellow was less vibrant than either of its parts alone.

To call my digital art 'mixing' is inaccurate though; digital art is fundamentally different from what Itten was doing in the 1930s with a finite selection of paint pigments. When I use my digital painting app, I choose from an infinite number of mixtures, so the entire process is free from constraints from the start, and increased levels of mixing or derivation don't correspond with increasing levels of freedom the way they do in traditional paints. Thus digital art has immeasurably more freedom from the start. To skim over this chasm, we simply summarize this activity as one demonstrating how colors pair well together when they have been blended in similar ways.



Sarah Crumrine, Color Study III, digital

12. Itten, 29.

I finished by exploring contrasts; I made comparisons between the same colors on black and white backgrounds and observed how the colors seemed to change in size in depth. First, I made twin octa-color palettes and observed how against black, the same sized squares looked larger and the black border shrank. Depth was also affected; in the middle pair of contrasts the yellow triangle on black jumps out and blue moves back; on white it is the reverse. I was pleased with this effect, as it follows the theory outlined by Itten<sup>13</sup> and my Color Study I where lighter shapes rise to the foreground. Finally, with a background of shades of gray, I tested Itten's theory that "among cold and warm tones of equal brilliance, the warm will advance and the cold retreat"<sup>14</sup>, and observed the red-orange stand out particularly against the darker background. Additionally, I saw that within each bar of gray, the top edge appeared darker while the bottom edge of the same panel was faded. This was a surprising phenomenon that in between two comparisons—to one shade lighter and one shade darker—the same color will change so that it contrasts more strongly with either closer neighbor. I was fascinated by this dynamic behavior by something so passive as gray.

## Results

Movement helped! I lacked a no-treatment control to see if simply the act of practicing color exercises improved my feelings towards them, but I can conclude that there was no negative effect to combining various forms of movement with making. As I've said before, some of my

13. Itten, 77.

14. Itten, 78.

best ideas have come to me while running; it's the perfect storm of slight distraction of the body to allow the mind to wander, plus immersion in natural or urban surroundings full of inspiration and wonder. In this experiment when I went out for my exercise, I tried to notice the colors and contrasts of nature to bring back to my color study. For example, the sight of purple-red flowers on dark green heather shrubs informed my mixing of tertiary colors in Color Study II.

### Part III. Lessons For The Path Forward

One lesson for art education from this experiment and analysis of my other art projects is that a dedicated physical routine develops the art further, because movement helps prepare the mind and body. Movement practices before or within the craft can add additional meaning to the final product. Movement can be a preparation for the making, and it can be intrinsic to the making itself. The experience of sewing being meditative and rhythmic in a way that helped further develop the meaning of the piece was felt by me and my classmates both.

The specific benefit of rhythmic bodily movement is the heightened awareness it brings; deeper concentration is facilitated by intentional breathing, stretching, or aerobic practices. As I stated in my introduction, movement breaks down hesitations to create because it links the mind and body subconsciously, so that the hand can execute what the unconscious mind sees without the conscious mind stepping in with excuses.

Current literature echoes this; the media reports the findings of various psychological studies with results

connecting regular exercise with lessened depression<sup>1516</sup>, and some online sources even provide guidance specifically tailored to artists. The basis for these findings is not spiritual, it's in the biochemistry of the brain. My discovery that moving my body gives me freedom to find new ideas is similarly expressed by a painter quoted saying "when I run, I can step out of the mind and watch the thoughts...I can watch the film of my own thoughts [which] creates a relationship of sequence, and I can get very clear on ideas and possibilities"<sup>17</sup>. Another discovery of mine that bodily movement regimes build routine to prepare for art practices is echoed by artists interviewed, who say that exercise structures their time.

The lesson from Itten's overall story of strict diet, cleansing practices, and spirituality is that purity can be misinterpreted in dangerous ways. Though Itten appears to be free of connection to Nazism, talking about his art pedagogy being based on Mazdaznan still brings attention to a religious movement with a harmful past and invokes questions of how much a teacher's personal beliefs should be expressed to their students. In [Sommer Ullrich's chapter on Itten](#), she states "teaching should not involve the teacher's personal religion", and I agree with

15. Fields, Jonathan, "The Creative Brain on Exercise". Fast Company, Sept. 29, 2011. Accessed March 2, 2021 <https://www.fastcompany.com/1783263/creative-brain-exercise>
16. Loria, Kevin. "Exercise might be more than good for your brain — it could make you more creative as well". Business Insider, Nov. 4, 2016. Accessed March 2, 2021 <https://www.businessinsider.com/exercise-benefits-brain-creativity-stress-2016-11>.
17. Kunitz, Daniel, "Why Exercise Makes You More Creative". Artsy, Nov. 24, 2017. Accessed March 2, 2021 <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-exercise-creative>.

that in cases where the teacher's religion is separate from the subject matter they signed up to study.

Misinterpretation of purity exists in modern life, where strict habits consume broader joys, or limited acceptance of body types outside the norm of thin, white, athletic prevent many from participating in dance or fitness.

Movement and spirituality have the potential to help or harm, depending on how strictly they are pursued. Variety is as necessary to a maker's life as routines that carve out time for dedicated experimentation in the colors, forms, and material of making. I would not change Itten's lessons, but future art educators or student makers should only follow his teaching with the caveat of 'everything in moderation'.

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# 5

## CONNOR ETTINGER ON BUCKMINSTER FULLER

### Introductions

*Connor Ettinger is a 19 year old sophomore at the University of Washington, Seattle. A student enamored by all forms of art, he has spent much of his time playing music, and will be applying to his university's Architectural Design program this March. He has been lucky enough to travel the world numerous times, and hopes to continue expanding his perspective for the rest of his life.*

*Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983), was an American architect*

*and an artist, a philosopher and a pragmatist, in his own words, an Anticipatory Design Scientist. Spending a number of Summer Sessions at the Black Mountain College, Fuller's designs have had a wide reaching and tangible effect on the modern world. He tasked himself with tackling the world's problems, seeing how much change one person could effect over the course of their life.*

## A Letter to the Artist

Dear Buckminster Fuller,

Why do we make? I'm writing to you for an answer, but I also hope that in writing, I might arrive at one myself. I've sat in my room for a number of weeks asking myself this question. The time I spend in front of a piece of paper or a computer screen astounds even me. For one reason or another, often school, I have to make something, I have to create. Living in the 21st century, the amount of new design is almost nauseating, and the constant flow of information into our brains has me wondering what it is all for. A new smartphone comes out seemingly every week, new computers, televisions, all for a price. An unfortunate truth that I seem to be moving towards is that the process of design is weighted—it takes time and money. The unfortunate entanglement of making and modern day profit means a somewhat more complicated design process than I used to envision. Once again I return to why I'm writing to you. I want a change of perspective, and you might be able to offer that.

I suppose that I consider myself a design student. I spend hours each day attempting to create something meaningful, something that I can imbue with my own

personality and intent. When I put pencil to paper or press a key on my keyboard, I am expending energy and resources with the goal of generating something. At the moment, I do wonder what I am saying with my creations—why I put a roof over this structure, why this wall is glass, why everything just ends up being a big box—these questions tend to bog down my design. The most obvious and practical answer for why I design is for a grade, to get into a design program, and it's the only thing clouding my mind these days, but I wouldn't like it to always be like that. In many ways, I find that I'm very averse to failure, a practice that I see as detrimental in the future. Were I to make excuses, I would say that the timescale for all of my work doesn't exactly allow for me to take my time in creating something that speaks to who I am.

You have been able to, over the course of your life, craft some sort of a perspective. From a disillusioned veteran with his own one-man company, to a world renowned designer, you've traveled a wild path to reach the end of your career<sup>1</sup>. If I had to describe you, you would be an engineer, and a designer, an architect, an artist, a thinker and more. You're a visionary who roots their thought in the fundamental truths found in the present. You have found a way to encapsulate all of the above characteristics into the persona of an Anticipatory Design Scientist. You have often shared your beliefs in human kind to weather impending ecological disasters. Though the thing I find most interesting is that, in the light of all this, you still acknowledge the ironic helplessness of humanity as a baseline. In one of your 1975 series of lectures, titled "Everything I Know," you lament that "There is a strange vanity of man, and I think the vanity that he has, was

essential to his being born naked and helpless, and having to make the fantastic number of mistakes he had to make in order to really learn something”<sup>2</sup>. This commentary interests me in the context of your mindset around design, how human beings have failed countless times in their adapting to the planet, “deceiv[ing] himself a great deal,”<sup>2</sup> in the process. Man’s tenacity to continue problem solving is inspiring. Is this perceived foolishness to believe in the future the very thing that you’ve tried to hone? Important to note, I think, is how long it must have taken you to reach this conclusion, these lectures being from so late in your career. It makes me wonder if you’ve always held onto such an optimistic point of view. This in mind, I want to take a look at why you create, and how I might be able to learn from it.

Do I think the world is perfect? No. Do I think it can be perfect? I’m still not so sure. Maybe in that way we differ. The world in 2021 is a complicated situation. A pandemic, violent climate change, and unfettered greed see the planet heading in a dangerous direction. I think that I am a pessimist, maybe too much so, and I’d like to see through your eyes for a time. I hope that maybe it will remind me of what I love so much about creating. I once heard you lamenting on the many technological advances occurring throughout your lifetime, man taking flight, reaching the poles of the planet. In a way, it is indicative of your view of human capacity in general, and as you add, again in 1975, that “impossibles are happening,”<sup>2</sup> surely they are in a way that isn’t stopping,

There’s a famous picture of you, spending a summer session at the Black Mountain College in the late 1940s. This is at an interesting point in your path, caught somewhere in between a burgeoning career and wide

scale stardom. In that way, I'm sure the summers that you spend at the college were extremely formative to your life. Surrounded by students, you construct your prototype for the geodesic dome, a structure minimal in material that maximizes use. In your own words, the dome "is very much stronger and more efficient than other ways of enclosing space,"<sup>4</sup> a design with the capacity to be very much world changing.



Buckminster Fuller, 'Supine Dome,' 1948, Cloth

The prototype is constructed of a number of pieces of cloth, all attached in a specific way so that you hope will see the dome rise on its own by means of tension (tensegrity as you call it—in your words from 1928 "utilizing gravity instead of opposing it"<sup>5</sup>). This has been a long project of yours, over the span of a number of decades, and in this moment you hope to see a success. You finish the construction, step back and wait. What must've felt like an eternity, those few moments would

eventually end in disappointment, the structure failing to rise from the ground, staying stagnant as a collection of intricately connected cloths. What did that moment feel like? To take a prototype to such a finished point to see it not work must have been demoralizing, and it amazes me how committed you were to finishing the design. I feel that when I settle on some sort of perfect design, I tend to falter in the middle, especially if the idea doesn't entirely pan out.

Clearly, it must not have discouraged you all too much. At the BMC, you perfected your design, and its wide scale implementation came soon afterward thanks to the US military<sup>5</sup>. The choice to focus on suspension through tensegrity, serves as a model for design problem solving in the modern world, and the commitment to see it through to its finished product is rather commendable in its own right. I suppose that commitment comes from your goal to create a perfect world, to make more with less, to be free of the shackles of politics (or "we're licked"<sup>3</sup> as you put it). Today, you'll find hundreds of thousands of geodesic domes across the planet. It's in many ways tantalizing to think about the possibility of an idea, given the proper care and resources.

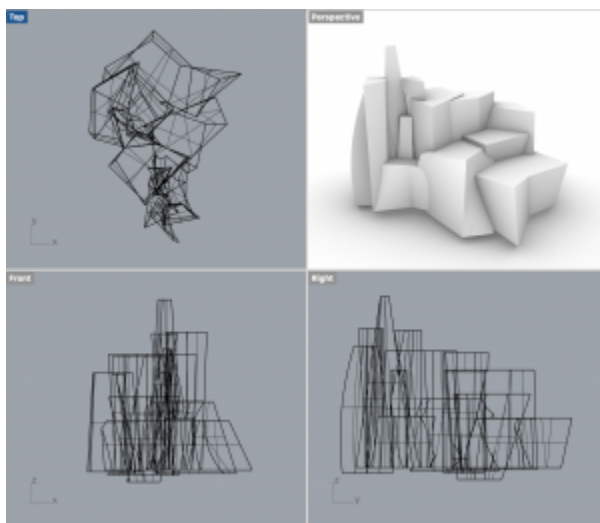


Buckminster Fuller, 'Geodesic Dome,' Opened 1967, Steel, Acrylic

Ironically, I've been trying my hardest to evoke your spirit in my recent ventures. I have an architectural studio course where our latest project is asking us to build a structure that holds the "idea" of and reflects on how my culture views water. It might be a bit of a high brow topic, but I've tried to ground myself. In some ways, I find some need to be realistic in the things that I create—I don't exactly expect to have the backing of the US military and countless "unsolicited checks," as you did with your geodesic dome<sup>5</sup>, when designing my water storage facilities. There's a definite conversation to be had about having the privilege to design, and whether that affords a responsibility or demands a certain humility, but I digress.

I took a course this quarter called The Politics of Making. For one of our assignments, we designed our

own time capsules, to be opened 100 years from now. Beyond that, the project was open ended. Immediately, my mind went to the ecological. In my view, what will be remembered in a century won't be what this generation made, but what it used—the waste we've accumulated and the impact that it will have had on the environment. My capsule takes a jagged shape, reminiscent of a city skyline or maybe the form of a massive trash heap. Inside, I planned to have it filled with things that have had their lifetimes expended: broken electronics, shreds of paper, single use plastics, and broken children's toys.



Connor Ettinger, 'Time Capsule,' 2021, Rhino CAD





Rendered interior elevation of 'Time Capsule'

My intent behind the project was to send a serious message about the capitalist, consumerist culture that is causing the degradation of our planet. It would be interesting to see the capsule opened in 100 years, to know what kind of planet exists then, and if my time capsule would have signaled the end of a wasteful era, or foreshadowed a dark ecological future. This work contrasts to much of your own because it doesn't have much in the way of practical use. Whereas your projects are to the goal of improving human lives on the planet in a tangible way, this time capsule is symbolic. Overall, I'm happy with what the time capsule means, and I believe that I have been able to present it in a convincing way, but I also hope that my work in the future moves farther towards your side of the spectrum—the practical, the type of designs that are meant to affect human lives in a positive way.

As I've previously noted, your ideas and designs are

clearly rooted in a sort of pragmatism, a desire to build with less, to create a form that can be easily replicable in a way that can easily improve living standards. The problem of food security in a growing population is clearly a massive one, but it surely gave you grounding when you first stumbled upon it after your time in the military<sup>1</sup>. The work of yours that comes to mind is the Dymaxion House. Rather than just sending a message about environmentalism, this work attempts to create a practical solution. With its relatively simple materials and on-site construction, I'm blown away by its concept, as were others—one man reportedly remarking about your work, "My God, this is the house of the future!"<sup>5</sup>. In my own creative process, I think I have a habit of getting lost in my contrived personal aesthetics, trying to find some abstract beauty in my own work that communicates to beauty in the eyes of others. What I find myself failing to acknowledge is the necessary practical uses of the built environment.



Buckminster Fuller, 'Dymaxion House,' 1941, Metal, Built for U.S. Farm and Securities Administration

The collision of art and science is a topic that you've often explored, searching for some middle ground in between the two. "The great scientists and great artists are not only subjective and pure but also objective and responsible inventors...Because of a comprehensive outlook, their art reflects the many disciplines, especially science...The only ones who don't get trained for specialization are artists, they want to be whole."<sup>6</sup> I think that aesthetics and pragmatism have a natural meeting place, though I don't think I've found it. Maybe the concept of making something has found itself trapped between two uses, that for need and that for use, when it could be that those aren't all too different. In that way, the mingling of art and science doesn't seem too outlandish. Though, I doubt I will be able to reach that connection for a long time.

I've given a lot of thought to why we make, and I've come to the conclusion that there isn't any one clear reason. It's frighteningly open ended. I suppose that, at a

baseline, we create in response to a need or a want—the lack of shelter, for example. These needs vary though. You feel an altruistic need to better the lives of people on Earth, and for me, I think I’m still discovering my need or want. These factors change too: comparing the rather more streamlined vision of your 4D company founded in 1927<sup>1</sup> to your focuses later on in the 1900s, your specific aspirations appear to shift from time to time, though the central guiding mission always remains intact, to adapt humanity to best suit the world we’ve been given. I hope to one day find a driving factor as visceral as yours.

I often wonder about how one develops a “style.” Clearly, your work follows some guiding principles. From your domes in Antarctica to your Dymaxion map and its World Game, design motifs show up throughout your work. The collaboration and streamlining of shapes emphasizes how you see the universe and how it comes forward in your design. I think that, if you have a style, it is more defined by why you want to make and what you make. Developing a sort of artist’s touch on your own work was rooted in the design principles you developed—tensegrity, for example, is rooted in natural forms: “These [Dymaxion] homes are structured after the natural system of humans and trees with a central stem or backbone, from which all else is independently hung, utilizing gravity instead of opposing it. This results in a construction similar to an airplane, light, taut, and profoundly strong”<sup>5</sup>. If you have a style, it comes through in the striking geometric character of your works, and how that reflects the world we live in. How did your own style manifest? Do you even have a style, or do you strictly adhere to the needs that drive a project?

I suppose that, in many ways, one’s own “style” is

simply a reflection of their design convictions and philosophies. Yours are rooted in pragmatism and it is reflected in your designs: their simple, replicable composite parts made of easily used materials show a desire to mass produce for human need in a way that collaborates with rather than destroys the environment. I suppose that's why I feel so erratic in my designs—I don't have a philosophy formed yet, I'm still searching for my own version of "make more with less." Once I find my drive, my reason for creation, I hope that I will see it manifest in its own notable style. Further, I wonder about the role of failure in forming one's own design touch. I see some failures in your own work. Even the geodesic dome had its humble beginnings at the Black Mountain College, long before it became the architectural dialect that we know inhabits the world today.

I think that as a designer, I aspire to be like you, to see designs through because of an unwavering conviction, to allow that conviction to shape projects, in turn creating your own notable style. I want to learn more about the role of design, art and technology from your point of view. At one point, you were quoted saying, "That we have that kind of capability, despite our absolutely negligible magnitude physically, that we can deal with our minds in such magnitudes and do so quite reliably gives us a hint that human beings must have some very great significance in the scheme"<sup>7</sup>. With such an unrelenting belief in the human capacity, I'm sure it isn't so difficult to dream a little bit bigger.

Best,

Connor Ettinger

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## CAD

- T Capsule Int El Render
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# 6

## LUCY JIANG ON RUTH ASAWA

*Lucy Jiang (she/her) is a third-year studying Computer Science and Entrepreneurship at the University of Washington. She is passionate about designing, engineering, and expanding accessible technology to empower people of all abilities, and is involved in accessibility research in UW's Human Centered Design and Engineering department. Outside of school, she enjoys baking and cake art, skating, hiking, and exploring Seattle!*

*Ruth Asawa (1926 – 2013) was a Japanese American sculptor and artist. She was one of the first Asian American students at Black Mountain College, and was widely known for her crocheted and woven wire sculptures and her public works, which reflect artistic influences from her cultural heritage. As a strong advocate for arts education, she contributed greatly to*



*the creation and development of arts programs in her home city of San Francisco.*



Ruth Asawa, an artist who studied at Black Mountain College, weaves sculptures with wire

Dear Ms. Asawa,

Hope this letter finds you well! It's hard to believe, but we've just passed the one year anniversary (if we can even call it that) of COVID-19 and quarantine here in the United States. This past year, a year of broken promises, crushed dreams, heartbreaking goodbyes, and false hopes, has given all of us much to reflect upon, both

as individuals and as a society. Almost every day, I read about hate crimes committed against Asian Americans due to mounting division and paranoia due to the pandemic. Though society is certainly stronger together, right now, we are fragmented and polarized, speaking to echo chambers and avoiding accountability. There are certainly some parallels between the 2020s and the 1940s, despite the illusion of progress and growth over almost 80 years. After reading about your story, your work, and your legacy, I'm incredibly inspired by your resilience and pride in your identity in the wake of discrimination and I hope to learn from you to interweave these values with my own approach to art.



Ruth Asawa sitting among her looped-wire sculptures in 1956

For this course, we were asked to create a project related to stitching and textiles for our midterm. Your world-renowned looped wire sculptures capture a similar concept – taking a traditional method of weaving and crocheting and using a different medium to add a new dimension to the artwork. You have described the texture of your sculptures as “a woven mesh not unlike medieval mail” (Ruth Asawa, “Sculpture”), and have alluded that the forms were inspired by your childhood memories of

creating sketches of sculptural forms in the soil. You were first inspired to experiment with wire as a medium after a visit to Mexico. With the crocheted pattern in which you specialize, only the “shadow will reveal an exact image of the object” (Ruth Asawa, “Sculpture”) – indicating that the true magnitude of your hanging sculptures cannot be comprehended or appreciated until you step back and consider a part of the art on which you would usually never focus. I find it admirable that you were able to take such a rigid and sturdy material such as wire and transform it with textile techniques to become something that seems much more flexible, fluid, and dynamic.



Lucy Jiang, *Unraveled* (Midterm Project), 2021. Vanilla cake and vanilla buttercream.

For my midterm project, instead of creating a textile work, I created a cake that resembles an embroidery hoop with piped “embroidered” flowers that are on the cusp of fully blooming. Though this was a major risk, I was excited to channel something that I knew well into an art piece related to something that I was newly learning about. We’ve both adopted a stitching technique and transferred it to a different artistic medium with your sculptures and my midterm project. I find it interesting to draw similarities between our approaches to expanding upon existing textile methods. This project was incredibly thought provoking and enjoyable, as I was able to take something traditional and build upon it in an innovative way to create something new altogether.

One of my motivations for deviating from the assignment’s fabric requirement was because I thought it would be interesting to connect baking to embroidery work. Many textile projects in history have been used for activism, such as the AIDS quilt and handkerchiefs embroidered by women suffragists. I’ve also noticed a recent surge of using cakes and desserts as a medium to spread important messages on social media, showing another clear parallel between confectionary and embroidery. However, textiles can be preserved and honored in their original form in museums or as family heirlooms, serving as a persistent reminder of the textile’s message. Cakes, on the other hand, are temporary – no matter whether they are kept by the original artist, given to others, or kept in a museum, there is only so long before the cake begins to decompose. I speculate that photo documentation is the only way to capture and widely share cake art for activism, although

using the cake as an incentive can be an effective way to spur people to action.

Traditionally, throughout centuries, both baking and embroidery are seen as a domestic activity and women's hobbies, but the most famous pastry chefs and fashion designers are commonly men. In the modern day, this same dichotomy stands – women and other minoritized groups reclaim a method of craft to empower the people who create and benefit the most from their works, yet they receive minimal recognition and are rarely taken seriously or granted as much prestige as they should.



Lucy Jiang, *Unraveled (Progress)*, 2021. Vanilla cake and vanilla buttercream.

While creating the midterm project, I reflected greatly on the role of baking and stitching in the domestic sphere as opposed to the professional sphere, and it helped me think more deeply about my own role in reclaiming this medium for both myself and other women home bakers. When baking, not only do I enjoy the process, which I find to be thought-provoking and therapeutic – I also

find pleasure and joy in sharing my baked goods with others to commemorate a milestone, to celebrate a birthday, or even just for no reason. In fact, despite being so temporary, desserts are often associated with major occurrences in one's life, and they can often make a lasting impression. It's always gratifying to see the smile on others' faces when they receive baked goods, and this is one of the biggest reasons why I love baking and creating cake art.

When you create art, what motivates you? What makes you curious – what drives you to push the envelope and create something completely new? I know that you've mentioned that your "curiosity was aroused by the idea of giving structural form to the images in [your] drawings... These forms come from observing plants, the spiral shell of a snail, seeing light through insect wings, watching spiders repair their webs in the early morning, and seeing the sun through the droplets of water" (Ruth Asawa, "Sculpture"). In terms of shapes and forms, you seem to take lots of inspiration from nature, which is full of a multitude of coexisting geometric and random patterns, giving rise to your fantastical and unique silhouetted sculptures. But what would you consider to be the most gratifying part of the process? Would it be looking at your finished work and seeing its resemblance to the beauty of nature, or would it be knowing that you have created something new altogether, something that celebrates nature but can never emulate it?



Ruth Asawa, *Aurora*, 1986. Stainless steel.

Furthermore, although you were most famous for your looped wire sculptures, some of your other well-known works of art are the Nihonmachi and Aurora fountains. Both of these sculptures feature a paper fold (origami) design inspired by your many Saturdays spent at Japanese Cultural School (Ruth Asawa, “Public Commissions”). In creating these public sculptures, you represented and paid homage to your own cultural heritage through your work, bringing to light the role of art as a cultural artifact as well. Not only are these sculptures beautiful, but they are a testament to your pride in your background, despite being of a nationality that faced unjust internment merely 30 years prior to the casting of these fountains.



Out of curiosity, did you practice these origami fountain designs during your childhood? Or were they constructed by piecing together bits of memories of previous paper fold patterns?

As exemplified by my midterm project, most of my baked creations are western recipes, reflecting the country in which I was born and raised – my parents rarely used the oven when I was growing up, except as an occasional drying rack. Baking is an art form that I learned on my own, starting from inedible chocolate hockey puck muffins in 2013 and evolving into classical-art inspired cakes after years of trial and error. For me, the biggest sign that I had finally found my true passion was my desire to learn more. One example of experimentation and inspiration from Chinese traditions was a giant mooncake cake that I created in 2019, in which I used almond extract and cocoa powder to subtly recreate the nuanced flavor of lotus seed paste and used buttercream to achieve the details that adorn the top of a traditional mooncake. Though I don't always incorporate my Chinese heritage into my baked goods, I constantly try to consider and seek out opportunities to syncretize these two cultures and meld them into one cohesive work. However, this is a constant push and pull, and there isn't a day where I don't feel a disconnect between my Chinese and American values.

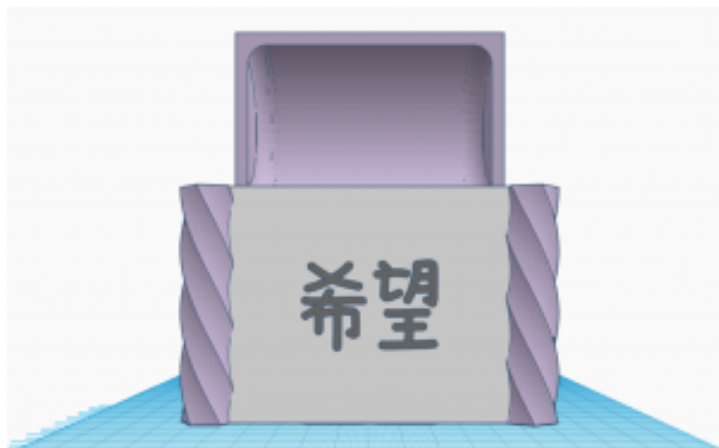


Ruth Asawa, Nihonmachi, 1975. Corten steel.

As a first-generation Japanese American, I wonder if you've felt these internal conflicts too. Your sculptures, like the Nihonmachi and Aurora fountains, are clear examples of a successful and impactful integration of your Japanese and American cultures. That being said, I imagine that behind these bronze sculptures are a pile of scrapped designs, ideas that never saw the light of

day because they didn't quite capture the meaning you intended. Did you ever find these two aspects of your cultural identity clashing with each other? How were you able to grapple with this sense of cognitive dissonance to turn these thoughts into art, if you even did at all? Did disagreements between different aspects of your background ever impact your art and your approach to creating art?

For my time capsule project for this course, I was inspired by both your work and my own cultural heritage as a Chinese American born in the United States. However, I found myself struggling to find the right words to say. Should I have said something in English, a language in which I feel more confident in expressing my true thoughts? Or should I have written something in Chinese, a language known for its four-word idioms that can allude to an entire story or myth with just four syllables? Ultimately, I inscribed the Chinese word for "hope", 希望, on the front of the box – like your fountains, I was drawing on experiences and skills learned from my nine years of Chinese School while I was growing up.



Lucy Jiang, Time Capsule, 2021. Digitally rendered on TinkerCAD.

While the onset of the digital age has made handwriting more and more obsolete (something that I experience with English, and much more so with Chinese), I find myself hanging onto these handwriting skills that once felt so familiar but now feel so foreign. As part of the project, it was quite odd to explore technology-aided hand-making with TinkerCAD – I was using an online program to handwrite Chinese characters. I was harshly scrutinizing every stroke, undoing and redoing each one multiple times before I was satisfied with my characters, alluding to the ideas of perfectionism with digital art that we’ve discussed in class. I’m wondering if you’ve ever felt that way too – did you feel like your experiences growing up in the United States took away from your Japanese identity? Did you feel as though you were losing touch with a part of your life?

Though I mulled over what to write on the box, at the end of the day, I believe that writing 希望 achieved my intended purpose – hope is a word that can convey a multitude of meanings to each different person who

sees it. In creating art that celebrates my cultural heritage and my mother tongue, I'm able to reconnect with the customs, values, and memories that have shaped me into the person that I am today.

This concept of creating art that captures your background is something that I hope and believe will stand the test of time. Even 100 years from now, I hope that people are proud of their cultures and what makes them different, leveraging our different perspectives and insights to become stronger, together. Your ability to transcend cultural boundaries and honor your own background and identity as an Asian American artist is extremely inspiring, and in the future, I hope to be able to create and appreciate even more art that can speak to shared cultural experiences.



Installation shot from solo exhibit at M.H. de Young Museum in 1960

Lastly, another aspect of your legacy that resonates deeply with me is your commitment and dedication to expanding access to education, specifically arts education in the San Francisco Bay Area. Especially after being barred from obtaining your Bachelor's Degree in teaching, and considering all of the other barriers that you faced in your educational journey, your resilience in the face of hardship and racism is evident through both your time at Black Mountain College and your lifelong advocacy efforts.

You were “a firm believer in the radical potential of arts education from your time at Black Mountain College” (David Zwirner), a mindset that led you to help open the first public arts high school in San Francisco, which is now named the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts in your honor. Later in your life, I saw that you believed in this mantra: “learn something, apply it, pass it on so it is not forgotten” (Ruth Asawa, “Arts Activism”), tying into the idea behind our time capsules as well. You were able to incorporate your learnings from Black Mountain College into the Alvarado School Arts Workshop starting in 1968, a workshop program that provided arts education to young children. Through your personal experiences and benefits of working directly with professional artists, you believed that students should have access to this same level of immersion and exposure so that they could become “more highly skilled in thinking and improving whatever business one goes into, or whatever occupation” (Ruth Asawa, “Arts Activism”).

I wonder, if you were to go back in time to when you were at Black Mountain College, would you have recognized just how transformative and radical that

experience was? Or did the true value of your arts education from Black Mountain College only become evident after the fact? Did you consider other occupations after Black Mountain College, or were you confident that art (and later, teaching art) was your true calling? Especially as a current university student, I think about this more often than I should – is my interdisciplinary education just one piece of the big puzzle that makes me, me? Will the memories that I placed in my time capsule turn out to be pivotal moments, or are they just treasured memories that have no impact on the ultimate direction of my life? Are these four years of my life deeply shaping who I am and will be, whether that's through the people that I know, the activities that I'm doing, and everything that I'm learning... and I just don't know it yet?



Adding another layer of loops to a large looped-wire sculpture

As one of the first Asian American women at Black Mountain College, you broke boundaries, pioneered new and creative forms of sculpture, advocated for access and equality in education, and inspired many women after you to do the same. You have shown that, even in times of

division, it is possible to stay true to who you are and to celebrate your roots. It's been extremely inspirational to be able to study your story and life experiences through this class, and I hope to honor your legacy as best as I can.

Thank you for showing us that we all have the power to sculpt our own path.

Lucy Jiang

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- Ruth Asawa working in her home © Imogen Cunningham
- 1956RuthLoopedWireSculptures © Paul Hassel
- FinalCake © Lucy Jiang
- WaitingProgress © Lucy Jiang
- 1986AuroraFountain © Hudson Cuneo
- 1975NihonmachiFountain © Carlos Villa
- TimeCapsule © Lucy Jiang
- 1960RuthSoloExhibit © Paul Hassel
- AsawaAtWork © Imogen Cunningham

# 7

## AUSTIN KENNEDY ON KAREN KARNES

*My name is Austin! I'm currently an atmospheric science major with a focus on climate at the University of Washington. I'm very concerned about the current condition of our climate (as many others are) and that's why I have chosen to study it. Aside from academics, I'm also very interested in music production and filmmaking.*

*Karen Karnes (1925-2016) was an American ceramist known for her variations of traditional ceramics. She attended Brooklyn College and learned her craft at Alfred University before teaching at Black Mountain College. She is known for using the salt kiln in her ceramics.*

Dear Karen Karnes,

My name is Austin. I'm a multimedia artist currently

studying Atmospheric Sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle, and I just wanted to discuss some pertinent questions about the creative process, the role of art, and the interpretation of the finished product. I am not a ceramist, but I think that there are valuable comparisons to be drawn from your experiences to my filmmaking, music production, and visual art. Hopefully, through this letter, I can find more understanding or meaning behind my work, as you have a valuable perspective through your life of experience.



Austin Kennedy, *Hanging Carcass*, 2021, bedsheets and twine.

Through my work, particularly my musical projects, I have been curious about how experimentation during the creative process influences or directs the product. You talked about how you liked to experiment with the

salt kiln and seeing how different materials react to the intense physical processes of the craft <sup>1</sup>. Although I cannot relate to this exactly (as I have never touched ceramics), there are many similarities to different artforms. Because you come from a strong technical background, having spent time perfecting your physical craft at Alfred University, I wonder what you think about inexperience as a form of experimentation. Personally, as a person who is new to visual art, I have found that my inexperience has led me to create in different ways that

1. Shapiro, Mark, and Karen Karnes. Oral History of Karen Karnes. Other. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, August 9, 2005.

are not very conventional. I recently created a hanging carcass out of bed sheets, to symbolize my body and my separation from it. Due to my sewing inexperience, it is rough around the edges, and I spent a great deal of time experimenting with techniques that are not very conventional. Because of this, I think it gives the piece a very unique character. You being someone who spent many years perfecting your craft, then experimenting more after attending Black Mountain College, do you think that experience is necessary to effectively experiment with your art? Based on the Black Mountain College's teaching methods, for example, Josef Albers focuses on materials, color, and form rather than intense technical background, I would expect that you support experimentation with inexperience<sup>2</sup>. This is concurrent with what you would say, as you express that it is not as important to have a strong technical background, but rather a strong perspective on the surrounding world. This is a statement I certainly agree with, and also how I would describe myself as an artist (as I am intentionally not a very technical artist).

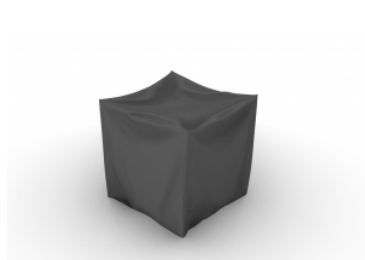
You talk about how sometimes you start working on a product without actually knowing where it will lead you. Put differently, you start with one piece and slowly add more and more based on the feel of the current form of the object<sup>3</sup>. Coming from a background of mostly science and mathematics, I find this very difficult for me

2. Creasy, Jonathan C. "The Pencil, the Brush, the Chisel': Black Mountain College and the Practice of Writing." Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center, October 10, 2020. <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/bmc-and-the-practice-of-writing/>
3. Karnes, Karen. "Karen Karnes, A Conversation." Studio Potter, n.d. <https://studiopotter.org/karen-karnes-conversation>.

personally. I feel like I am very hardwired to determine the form of everything before I even start my project. For the longest time, I would say that most of my creative process would happen in my head, but now I realize that this is just a justification for one of my shortcomings. If I've learned anything while creating my hanging carcass project, it is to learn to start. I spent so much time determining every exact measurement that I never really gave myself time to interact with differing materials. And when I finally started, I ended up scrapping most of those measurements anyways, instead of focusing on how it felt in person. Given your artwork and processes, I would think that you would agree that jumping off the deep end leads to some of your most valuable creations. These days I find myself doing more of my art behind my laptop. With artwork that is more computer-oriented, I think it is harder to jump into your work. Computers by nature are very logical and mathematical, so it feels less experimental and you need to know the exact methods to achieve what you want. This requires you to spend more time preparing in my opinion, but I would be curious to know what you think. I spend more time talking about computer aided design later on as well.

The use of a salt kiln is a very natural and considered process. Therefore, developing consistent rhythm is important to creating your ceramics I imagine. I know that you have expressed the importance of rhythm, and giving yourself time to gradually develop your project based on the developing mood of the piece. When creating my hanging carcass, I spent a great amount of time repeating the same stitches (a total of 8 hours of just sewing). Although this may seem to be painfully monotonous to some, it was more of an inspiring and

flowing process to me. Much like you said, it gave me time to slowly decide the outcome of my project. You are given the time to form new ideas, envision and experiment. This also connects to what I said earlier about when to start your project. Instead of spending great amounts of time planning every nuance to the project, you should instead start and let the ideas and adjustments form during the natural rhythms of creation. Not only that but the act of sewing, much like the act of slowly assembling pieces of clay, is very calming and engaging to the individual. I believe, as you have also expressed, that letting natural pacing take over your workflow is important to the creative process.



Austin Kennedy, Cloth Cube, 2021, made in Rhino.

I also feel like I can connect with what you said about the relationship between the artist and mass production. You talked about how it is difficult to keep yourself engaged when you are focused on the quantity

of your work, and the intentional recreation of objects. In the context of our modern era, where objects can become easily reproduced and created with computers via advanced printing methods, I wonder if more and more artists focus on the reproducibility of their work. It's hard to say that this makes the art less legitimate, but I think it's counterproductive to the creative processes. As you said, it's easy to hardwire your mind into an industrious setting when you create solely for an amount, and it's hard to maintain that experimentation and creativity. At

the same time, the difficulty to maintain profit as an artist pushes more people into this setting. Many people see commonly reproduced products less as artwork and more as functional objects. Many times, designers of mass produced clothing also think in this way. Instead of trying to create products that represent themselves and their creative vision, they will create based on what will sell. I don't know if this takes away from the artistic value of the product, but I think it is unfulfilling for the artist and can make someone feel more like a factory than a creator. This echoes what you have previously said about how this leads to the loss of joy of creating and limited experimentation. Going off of the idea of the use of technology for production, I think it is important to consider if the use of computer aided design as art takes away from the aesthetics of craftwork. I know that a lot of this is discussion a deviation from your art style and era, but I am curious about your thoughts. When I had to complete a 3D printing project with computer aided design, I felt like I needed to step away from the conventional methods and try to simulate an object that behaved like it was a real cloth object under gravity. Using computer programs to create art is inherently less interactive, and I feel like this can also take away from the joy of creation (much like how mass production does). I'd imagine that these methods of creation would be difficult for you (as you have studied physical ceramics for your entire life), but would be curious about your opinions on using 3D printing to create ceramics (by printing clay).

When looking at examples of your art projects, particularly your later pieces, I noticed how you would intentionally cut a slit in conventional items, like vases, bowls, and teapots. I was just wondering why you created these pieces? Of course, cutting a slit out of it renders its initial

function useless, so it raises questions on how we should interpret, use, or interact with the piece. When I created a small Basurita not long ago, I found freedom in the process of destruction. Going off of my feelings, I guess that you relished in the deconstruction of something you spent a great amount of time and energy creating. Therefore, the artwork wasn't created for use or interpretation, but rather as a method of expression of the creator. With the teapot example, I imagine that after spending years and years making the same teapots over and over again, it felt only sane to once completely ruin it once. I think that destruction is good in art, as it allows you to step back, take yourself less seriously and express or cope with feelings.

I've noticed how you've embraced imperfection in your work. You seem to understand how the use of the salt kiln is limiting in that you don't always have control over the end product. It seems like in the process of doing this, it gives room for the end product to assume its form and identity. This is something I greatly admire. I feel



Karen Karnes, Teapot, late 1900s, Clay



like intentionally limiting yourself is a great way of challenging your creative process and thinking in different ways to achieve the end product that you want. In my music production, I always am limited by my equipment (which is very expensive these days). Despite this, I always find ways to work around these limitations and create unique sounds that I think perfect sounding equipment would have prevented. You also have gone on to talk about how the salt kiln prevents repetition. You can put the same object in the salt kiln a thousand times over and over again and you will end up with a different product each time. I wonder though if this damages the relationship between yourself and the art you create. Because you have less control over the finished product, does it feel less personal? It certainly feels less deliberate, and I think that using an intentionally imperfect process can sort of remove the artist from the art. When I created that cloth cube in Rhino (the CAD program), I was using simulations, so I felt like I had very little control of the outcome. The only aspect I could change is the parameters of the simulation, and therefore it felt like more of a creation of the program rather than my creation. Some of this might relate to my dislike for using computer programs (due to the limited interaction), but I wonder if this somehow relates to using a salt kiln.

I hope you can help me gain some insight into these issues but thank you for all,

Sincerely,

Austin Kennedy

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# 8

## CEZANNE LANE ON MERCE CUNNINGHAM

*Cezanne Lane is a senior pre-med and biology major at UW. She was raised by an oil painter and a doctor. Her parents met in a dance class and both worked with instructors who were students of Merce Cunningham. Cezanne enjoys being outside, working with her hands, moving her body, and exercising her mind.*

*Mercier Philip “Merce” Cunningham (1919-2009), was an American dancer and choreographer who worked at Black Mountain College and is known for his collaborations with composer John Cage.*

### ***Preface***

In Cunningham’s 1994 essay, *Four Events That Have Led to Large Discoveries*, he discusses his most

influential findings and events throughout his lifetime. Among these are; The separation of music and dance, the use of chance operations in choreography, the integration of video and film into choreography, and the use of a 'dance computer' via a computer program called Life Forms.

My own background is of course very different from Merce Cunningham. But I feel that we connect in many ways. Among these is my background, being raised by two ex-modern dancers, one of which was trained by one of Cunningham's students. Another connection I have discovered is my own making process. In my own time I dabble in sewing garments, water coloring landscapes, and producing one of a kind embroidery pieces. In this class I engaged in two making projects. My first was a wearable piece that explored my own personal experience of waiting. My second making project was Rhino CAD recreation of my MacBook Pro. This project served as a time capsule which explored the complicated and nuanced relationship that modern society (myself included) has with social media and technology.

In this letter to Merce Cunningham I will discuss our connections in ideology, making processes, world view, and integration of technology. I will also discuss a theme in Cunningham's work that I find most compelling, a pull and tug between limitations and freedom as well as chaos and order.

### ***Letter to Merce Cunningham***

Dear Merce Cunningham,

When I imagine a dance, I have expectations of continuity and narrative. You rejected drama, narrative, and psychological information in favor of the infinite

possibilities that accompany a focus on human movement. You also rejected continuity of movements, shapes, even natural human movement. Your lifetime of rejecting what was already known or assumed to be true and correct was the catalyst for postmodernism of dance and performing arts. You shifted the focus away from music and plot that can be seen in pieces like *Swan Lake* and instead emphasized the movement of bodies. It reminds me so much of a scientist removing variables and observing changes. Again and again, throughout your life's work, there seems to be a pull and tug between limitations and freedom and in some ways, between chaos and order. It seems that your work uses the process of creating interactions between choreography, dance, music and technology as a way to investigate and manipulate this pull and tug.

You stripped dance down to its bones, its very foundation, when you began to toy with the methodology of "chance operations" as a choreographic development technique. In your 1994 essay, *Four Events That Have Led to Large Discoveries*, you state "From the beginning, working in this manner gave me a feeling of freedom for the dance, not a dependence upon the note-by-note procedure which I had been used to working. I had a clear sense of both clarity and interdependence between the dance and the music". I am fascinated by the fact that chance operation uses actual chance, as in literally rolling a dice or flipping a coin. I am amazed that you were able to let go of what movement you may have felt was "right" and let chance take its course. This technique in itself is full of order and chaos. It seems that the order is brought by the algorithmic structure of rolling a dice and choosing between a set of movements or combinations,

these are limitations. Whereas the freedom is found in the chaos of leaving decisions to chance rather than reason or desire. It seems that your process of creating choreography served as a way to grapple with this tug and pull between freedom and limitation.

Your use of chance operations feels similar to my own process of embroidery. Like the sewing needle, your choreography makes dance out of movement. Like the sewing needle, there are rudimentary steps, a subtle flick of the wrist or tuck of the pelvis is not too dissimilar from the in and out of the fabric that the needle does. Each step is seemingly random and yet methodical at the same time. But together they make a piece of art (whether it be a choreographed dance or an embroidered fabric). Additionally, there seems to be a sense of humility in this making process. It seems that in utilizing chance operations, you let go of the goal of the final product or expectations for the finished piece and just goes with where the movement seems to go. This really reminds me of my own experience of embroidery. I do have an image in mind for what I want my final product to look like. But really all I can do is focus on one stitch at a time. And while I do that, one stitch may be a little crooked or may guide me in a different direction. This can be seen in my embroidered jeans piece titled [Waiting](#). This piece features two primary embroidery techniques, one of which was new to me. The familiar chain stitch is used to create fireworks. This stitch is repetitive, orderly, and evenly spaced. The firework images themselves are predictable colors and vary in size only slightly. This leg is used to represent the predictability and repetitiveness of waiting. The second leg utilizes patchwork and a blanket stitch. This stitching is uneven, the colors

unpredictable, and the textiles themselves appear random. This leg is used to represent the possibilities of what can be built and created while waiting. It utilizes a seemingly repetitive and simple stitch to create a beautiful unpredictable sort of chaos, capitalizing on the privilege of available idle time spent waiting. The contrast of the two legs symbolizes personal choice and allows the viewer to essentially decide which foot they'll put forward. The wearable aspect of this piece is intended to serve a purpose for the wearer themselves, to look down at their pant legs and choose to make something beautiful and unpredictable out of their idle time. I attempted to use chance operation with each stitch. I let the needle itself toy with reliability and unreliability. Each new piece of fabric was chosen randomly, placed on the jeans randomly, and sewn with a random colored thread (I literally closed my eyes when picking from my box of embroidery thread). I attempted to embrace the play between chaos and order with my piece, as you have with your chance operations making process. It is this experience that made your work and process of making so compelling to me.

Another groundbreaking experiment that you engaged in was the separation of dance and music. I love imagining you setting out to make a 20 minute dance choreography and enlisting John Cage in making 20 minutes of music, with no other boundaries other than time. This collaboration, or lack thereof, freed dance to be its own stand alone, living breathing thing. You broke the shackles of traditional dance which was dependent on music to carry it and guide it.

I watched one of your collaborative pieces with John Cage titled [Roaratorio](#). It honestly made me quite

uncomfortable. It is chaotic and it doesn't feel like it sat right. The "music" is mostly random sounds. There seem to be a wide variety of bird noises included. The dancers run in and out of stage, each seems to be performing their own strange set of movements. Some are just hopping up and down, others run around, others leap side to side. I tried to push past my own discomfort and consider why I felt the way I did in response to this piece. I myself believe dance and music were created for each other. In my experience of the two of them, they are the blood that pumps through the other's veins. To me, separating them is depriving, isolating, and limiting. For me, I imagine it would be like separating texture and flavor in food or the needle and the thread in textiles. Also, so much of music and dance are deeply rooted in culture, history, and a diverse human experience. I worry that separating them from each other makes them mechanical and surgical and abandons their emotionality (and with this, limits their freedom). I think my discomfort was not an accident. In fact I think my response, to question what music and dance really was your exact intention. Is that true? Did you strip these art forms to their core and set them to be performed independently and simultaneously of each other to push me, the viewer, to completely reassess my views of the two of them?

Your choreography is described by a dancer, Carolyn Brown, she writes, "'this release from the [musical] beat could validly be called deprivation,' a strict adherence to that beat could 'rob both the dancer and the dance of the subtle rhythms unique to each human body'"(Brown, 2007). I am struck by the descriptions of strictness and deprivation. However when Eva Díaz writes "separation of the music from the dance resulted in a movement



style that accentuates “the rhythm of a body in movement”(Díaz, 2014) I think that I hear your intentions loud and clear. I wonder if I am missing the details and nuance when too much is happening at once, when music and dance are combined. As an experiment, I attempt to investigate this a little by watching videos of famous ballerinas. I am engaging in the practice of questioning my own perceptions and assumptions, in a way that I believe you would approve of. I switch the music on and off during one viewing. Next, I watch it all the way through without music. At one point, I close my eyes and listen to the music alone. Each time I notice something different. Without the music the dance is completely different. My focus on the dancer is sharpened, I begin to notice the pointing of her feet, the angle of her head, even the tilt of her hips and pelvis. But with the music alone, I feel my own body begin to twitch in response to the stillness. I certainly do not break in to dance but it draws my attention inwards, at the way I am sitting at my own chair. Your daring move to separate dance from music and music from dance is less deprivation and more about appreciation of the minutiae that goes into each movement and the freedom that is gained by this discovery, is it not?

In April of 1997, you choreographed a dance that used a specialized computer program which collected data, tracked movement with optical sensors and reflective spheres attached to dancers (Vaughan, 1997). Your work that combined dance, music, performing art, technology, and film pushed the boundaries of art. I have read your essays in which you discuss the challenges that came with working with video and film in regards to speed and space. You are known to have repeatedly quoted Albert

Einstein in saying “there are no fixed points in space”. I understand that this quote stuck with you and influenced the way you used space on the stage. The way that you reassessed the way that we value space opened up limitless opportunities for reshaping dance performance (beyond center stage). When I read this quote, it reminds me of the process of using computer aided design technology (CAD). In our CAD Rhino making project we used the computer to map specific points of an object. I made a computer and at first I tried to map it directly as I saw it. In attempting to make an exact replica of what I knew, I found that I could change dimensions and reject what physics or reality might require of most objects. Working in CAD allowed me to make a normal looking MacBook laptop with the apple logo jumping out of the screen and the words of the screen written backwards. I attempted to reject space. It was hard to commit to and to unlearn what I had already seen and been undeniably influenced by. Not unlike today’s CAD programs, you utilized the program LifeForms to map out movement of figures in space. You embraced the use of film, body sensors, and motion-capture technology soon after their very invention. I love imagining you moving the figures, or ‘Michelin men’ as you call them, joint by joint to create new human shapes. I watched [the very first dance that you created with LifeForms, ‘Trackers’](#). I must say, it was not beautiful. It was quite uncomfortable. Your movement and form was almost inhuman, dare I say robotic. But again, this performance forced me to question what ‘dance’ really is. Does it have to be beautiful? Does it have to have a narrative? I found myself searching for a narrative. I saw you move to the metal

ballet bar and I began to make something up, a message you were conveying.

I see a similar theme to this in modern CAD work. For so many years textiles and clothing were produced by individual people or small groups of people. The loom was used to weave cloth with the help of a person's fingers. Its many iterations played a key part in changing the way textiles and clothing were made. And today we have CAD programs that print pieces of clothing. These CAD-enabled designs do not just try to recreate what is already made, rather they appear to be attempting to redefine what clothing, fashion, and design really are. For example, the Spider Dress created by [Anouk Wipprecht](#) has mechanical arms that extend and retract in response to external stimuli. This dress is certainly not beautiful, but it pushes the viewer (and probably the wearer/user) to rethink our society-wide definitions and standards for beauty and design and the functions which they serve. This seems to mirror your use of LifeForms to map out movement of dancers, and the way that it forces us viewers to question what we define as beauty and dance and how we choose to integrate technology into these age-old concepts.

It turns out that yet again the limitations and possibilities that came with utilizing brand new technology gave you new ways to expand and evolve dance and performing art. As you put so gracefully put it, "I am aware once more of new possibilities with which to work" (Vaughan, 1997). You embraced the use of film, body sensors, and motion-capture technology soon after their very invention. In contrast, I myself felt infuriated while learning to use computer aided design technology. In our CAD making project we used the computer to

map specific points of an object. This process bears an uncanny resemblance to your work in which you used motion-sensing technology to map dancers' movements. While exploring the CAD program, I found myself frustrated with the limitations of trying something for the first time and being a beginner. I imagine that you felt a similar frustration while learning to utilize brand new technology with a background in dance in choreography (very much not a computer scientist). And yet, it seems that you were excited by the adventure of using something new and abandoning expectations (for himself and the viewers). I am forced to wonder why you chose to experiment so vastly. Was it driven by a desire to discover new realms of creativity or did it simply come from a place of humility? Rather than fighting the discomfort and limitations of trying something new or unexpected, you embraced it.

I can't help but wonder what you would think of our current limitations, amidst a global pandemic. I wonder what you would imagine using the platform of zoom, and working within the limitations of social isolation. This reminds me of the very first day of Honors 211 when we watched a Julliard video of students and professors performing their respective art form in their respective homes. They were limited by their situation but they brought each isolated piece together, utilized and embraced the available technology, and created a whole new form of art. I believe this very piece speaks volumes to your influence and relevance on today's art and culture.

I hope to carry your curiosity, humility, and bravery to rethink what is already known. I think this way of thinking will serve me well as a scientist in the future.

Thank you for your work.

Best Regards,  
Cezanne Lane

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# 9

## SASHA MAYER ON LEO AMINO

*Sasha Mayer is an aspiring educator, more comfortable outside than in, and an artist, sister and friend. She studies Community, Environment and Planning at the University of Washington and is focused on the interactions between education, communities, policies and place.*

*Leo Amino (1911-1989) is a Japanese-American sculptor who worked with a multiplicity of materials, including wood, resin, metal, thread, and plastics. He was a pioneer in using resin as a sculptural material in the United States. He taught at the experimental Black Mountain College during the 1947 and 1950 Summer Arts Sessions (one of three faculty of color to do so), instructing in wood.*



Leo Amino with sculpture "Anticipant" at Black Mountain College

### Leo Amino-

When I first laid eyes on your sculpture work, I was instantly captivated. The forms are organic, flowing and balanced. Light, space, color and material are elegantly composed to explore spatial relationships. You were no stranger to innovation and combination of new materials. Wood, vinyl, resin, brass, thread and plastic all featured cohesively in your works, placed together so naturally it would seem they had grown up alongside each other. I was initially drawn to your art because it was simultaneously visually soothing and complex.

As an artist, your journey was informed by many things- an upbringing in Taiwan and Japan, immigration to the United States, a university and arts education, World War II and two summers at Black Mountain college, to name a few. As an immigrant from one place of strong nationalist agenda to another, you may have often felt an outsider in both traditions, disillusioned from the

conformity and restrictions they encouraged<sup>1</sup>. As a member of the Black Mountain college faculty during the Summer Art Sessions, principles of open experimentation and a rejection of traditionalism and conformism likely drew you there. Your own work consistently rejected traditional sculptural forms in search of something more.

### **Processes of Making**

You were not one for planning per se- in general you did not keep sketchbooks nor block out sculptures before setting out to carve them. I can relate to this desire for working on impulse and inspiration rather than planning. My creativity and thought processes associated with making are often stifled by too detailed a plan. I guess I would consider my approach to art reflective of life, in that real life is organic and impossible to predict. I think you and myself share this understanding, seeing possibilities and chance in the spaces that plans would otherwise fill.

When you worked with wood, the making process was about progression and the flowing of the design into existence, rather than the carving away of the whole as form slowly emerges<sup>2</sup>. The final pieces are deliberately smoothed and polished to hide traces of the tools used to shape them. The good craftsman- you and one of your first mentors, Chaim Gross, agreed- “uses the fewest

1. “The Visible and the Invisible.” David Zwirner, 2020.  
<https://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/2020/leo-amino-the-visible-and-the-invisible/press-release>.
2. Harris, Ruth Green. “Artist and His Medium: How Chaim Gross and Leo Amino Regard Wood Sculpture and Its Problems.” New York Times, December 29, 1940.



tools and learns to know them”<sup>3</sup>. Products are visually detached from the process in much of your work beyond wood as well. The eye traces the flowing forms, the lines, the positive and negative spaces of your multi-material sculptures and wonders, how did such a composition come to be?



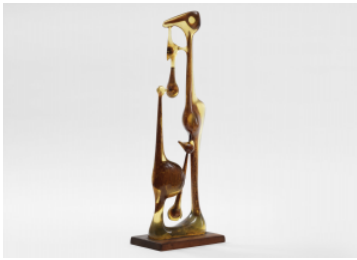
Leo Amino, "Composition #25," 1952 (polyester resin, wood, mesh and thread)

This is a difficult question to answer, as little record exists of your making processes, particularly with experimental materials like resin. I do know that your home was frequently your studio. You once used a baking sheet as a mold for the

resin sculpture *Composition #25*, and while working with resin you consulted local industry for information on temperature and recipe specifics<sup>4</sup>. Polyester resin, at the time when you began experimenting with it, was an industrial material. Casting resin involved pouring liquid starting material into a mold, allowing gravity to fill all the crevices, and then curing it by introducing a chemical catalyst that generates heat internally and hardens the cast<sup>5</sup>. The process of casting resin is very technical, and

3. Harris, Ruth Green. "Artist and His Medium: How Chaim Gross and Leo Amino Regard Wood Sculpture and Its Problems." *New York Times*, December 29, 1940.
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5. "Thermosetting Polymer." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation,

this adds meaning to your work by further questioning the common perception of a nature-technology binary. When the technical process of casting resin is combined seamlessly with wood carving to create very biomorphic results, we see that technology (here the technicality of resin) is informed by nature for the purpose of reproducing natural forms. After all, it was naturally occurring resins such as amber that inspired synthetically produced resins. Sculptures such as *Interplay #11* and *Winter Scene* exemplify this fusion of making processes.

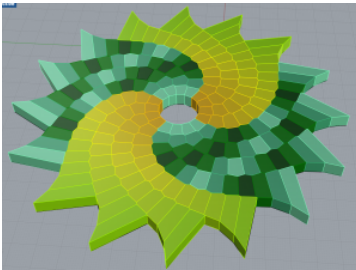


Leo Amino, "Winter Scene," 1951 (polyester resin, wood)



Leo Amino, "Interplay #11," 1948 (polyester resin, string)

## Experiences of Making



Sasha Mayer, "Time Capsule," 2021 (designed with Rhino 7)

You embraced the exploration of new mediums and celebrated the inherent qualities of your materials, yet also espoused the idea of using few tools well in your early years working with wood. I wonder what you would think of the digital age of design. Computer aided design (CAD) programs have taken the world by storm, providing a countless number of tools for arriving at one's destination. When I was designing a time capsule using CAD, I had to learn the craft as I practiced it, watching step by step instructional videos and surfing

user forums. I copied the actions and processes of others to learn, and the smoothing aspects of the program itself created much less opportunity for a learner's small flaws and mistakes to be recorded. At the same time, using the more complex parametric tools provided by Grasshopper allowed for input of unique data and the output of unique forms, despite the copied algorithm. Ultimately this got me thinking- how does the act of copying change the value and meaning of process? I found that following the steps of others changed the making experience significantly from that of more traditional mediums. For an inexperienced digital maker like myself, precision came at the cost of making autonomous decisions about what function to execute or what tool to use. The process was also disjointed- as the architecture of the algorithm builds, the output does not make itself visible in a consistent way. The product in progress may go through many transformations before concluding in its final form. The making process through replication or imitation is changed, but I would argue it is no less valuable. This kind of making challenges you to think big-picture, to sharpen your attention to detail, to be aware of the act of imitation and to think creatively about how to ensure the project is still uniquely your own.



In comparison to CAD, textiles represent the “more traditional medium.” In my own experience of creating a wall hanging that embodied the feeling of waiting, needle, thread and fabric worked in cohesion and with rhythm. This is in stark contrast to my more disjointed experience with CAD. Additionally, when I was sewing, my precision was limited



Sasha Mayer, "Waiting," 2021 (cloth with thread, yarn, twine and sequin appliqué)

by the physical capabilities of my two hands but I had full autonomous decision-making in command of the needle

and thread. Imprecision became an important piece of the making process. Given the history of textile-making as feminized labor, and its evolution into precise, machinated factory production, rejecting efficiency and painstakingly stitching by hand felt at times like a reclamation of the medium. For me, CAD and sewing created entirely different making experiences. I wonder if you experienced any of these feelings when working with resin in comparison to wood. Did you have similar thoughts about the non-rhythmic, technical process of casting resin and the instinctual, sensual process of carving wood? If so, you did something I have yet to do in my art- you combined the two different processes to make something revolutionary. When I try to imagine what it would be like to attempt to combine my own disparate mediums, textiles and CAD, I see that this is a useful comparison (for those of us living in the 21st century) to understand how innovative your work was.

### **Perception and Visibility**

In your sculptural work there is a clear interest in light and use of transparent material, something that I appreciate. The pieces in *Refractional #48* are geometric, weighty forms, but they appear weightless, capturing light, color and depth. They are not static, but are dynamic in the way that light itself is- the impression shifts and changes gradually with the viewing perspective as one moves around the piece. This is a beautiful thing to be able to capture in a work of art. As I worked on my Waiting project, my vision was to capture the motion of light in a similar way- to create something that is fundamentally connected to the place it is hung and changes temporally as the quality of natural light shifts

throughout the day. In its final form, I am skeptical of how well my project created the effect I was hoping for, but it makes me all the more impressed with your Refractionals.



Leo Amino, "Refractional #48," 1969 (polyester resin)



Leo Amino, "Refractional #48," 1969 (polyester resin)

Related to light and transparency is the idea of visual perception. You had a fascination with vision, particularly as a philosophical problem of internal and external relation<sup>6</sup>. Are our perceptions of

6. "The Visible and the Invisible." David Zwirner, 2020.  
<https://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/2020/leo-amino-the-visible-and-the-invisible/press-release>.

things we see constructed from what is already held in our minds, or do they represent what is physically there? And by extension, what is made visible in a sculptural work and what is not? Many of your sculptures seem to be inquiries into these questions. Viewers of your work today note how it reveals otherwise hidden or invisible beauty in an intimate experience between the viewer and the sculpture. It is interesting that visibility and invisibility are phenomena you contend with in your art, but they are also things that your art contended/still contends with. What I mean by this is that you, an artist who took sculpture to new places with exceptional skill, could be considered nearly “invisible” today. For example, you and Ruth Asawa- two pioneering Japanese-American artists- were both creating sculptures at the same time (she was a student around the time you were teaching at Black Mountain College). Ruth Asawa’s art has only come to wider recognition in the past fifteen years or so, and your work has remained even more invisible<sup>7</sup>. I think it’s important to acknowledge this fact and place it in a larger societal context. As a Japanese-American during WWII and as person of color in American society, the white supremacist mainstream art world was not made to elevate you or Ruth Asawa. It seems that you may have already known this, and been unconcerned with the visibility of your work because of it<sup>8</sup>. Writing to you from the future, I can say that

7. Yau, John. “The Art World’s Erasure of a Revolutionary Japanese-American Artist.” Hyperallergic, November 5, 2020.

<https://hyperallergic.com/577159/leo-amino-david-zwirner/>.

8. Yau, John. “The Art World’s Erasure of a Revolutionary Japanese-American Artist.” Hyperallergic, November 5, 2020.

<https://hyperallergic.com/577159/leo-amino-david-zwirner/>.



generally neither the art world nor American society have structurally changed. Whether you would have cared for more visibility, or perhaps would not have wanted it coming from the world of “high art,” more people, not just the occasional art critic, should be seeing your incredible work. I continue to be enthralled by your sculpture and hope that this published letter may allow others to have the same experience.

Sincerely,  
Sasha

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# 10

## TOM MIKOLYUK ON MARIANNE BRANDT

*Besides being a sophomore Mechanical Engineering major at the University of Washington, Tom Mikolyuk is a brother, son, immigrant, athlete, plant dad, aspiring industrial design consultant, and above all, a maker. He makes multimedia, he makes physical objects, and he makes things happen.*

*Marianne Brandt (1893-1983) was a German multidisciplinary artist who, after training as a painter in Weimar in the 1910s, spent the mid-to-late 1920s as a designer, photographer, and the first female head of the metal workshop at the Bauhaus. Later, she did more industrial design and art education work, including for Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius' architecture firm.*

*Unlike many of the other wonderful chapters in here, this one*

*isn't formatted as a letter. Do think of it as a script for a soon-to-be reflective video essay.*

Chairs, teapots, and food containers are objects many of us 21st-century humans use every day. The other commonality between these objects is they were conceived and produced by industrial designers. When our interaction with those objects is seamless, we don't notice their designs and what thought went into making those objects possible. However, interactions with things can be negative or cause negative outcomes in life, either by accident or intentionally from a designer's work. Since designers hold such power over the way our material possessions are made and how they're meant to be used, what is their role in creating a future that's equitable and accessible to everyone? More generally: how do makers make a positive impact on society, especially with pressing social justice and climate issues facing a new generation of makers?

The modern design languages of the specific three objects in the previous paragraph, among others I didn't mention, began at the Bauhaus. At the beginning of his manifesto for the Bauhaus, architect Walter Gropius, its founder, wrote that "the ultimate goal of all art is the building"<sup>1</sup>. On the surface level, the Bauhaus's aim was to combine the ideas from visual arts and the practices of crafts to create the "building of the future". On an overarching level, however, the Bauhaus aimed to "create a new guild of craftsmen, free of the divisive class pretensions that endeavoured to raise a prideful barrier

1. Gropius, Walter. "Program of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar." Design Museum of Chicago, 1919. <https://bauhausmanifesto.com>.

between craftsmen and artists”<sup>2</sup> and redesign society at large<sup>3</sup>, allowing the working class to access good design. Student-artists at the Bauhaus shaped their work based on forced connections<sup>4</sup> and a “synesthetic theory” of harmony between color, sound, and movement, as well as the three “fundamental shapes” of triangles, squares, and circles<sup>5</sup>. The Bauhaus also basically birthed the idea of “form follows function”<sup>6</sup>, a phrase expressing the idea that the physical appearance of a design arises specifically from its intended uses and functions. Seeing that the Bauhaus has been so influential in industrial design in the last 100 years and that I want to pursue a career related to industrial product design, it seemed fitting to me to study a large contributor to the Bauhaus’s influence: Marianne Brandt. In this class, I explored the final question mentioned in the previous paragraph through the context of my own making projects and the legacy of Brandt’s work as a student at the Bauhaus.

2. Gropius.

3. BBC Documentary - Bauhaus 100 - 100 Years of Bauhaus \ Walter Gropius. Brick Teasers, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2a45UBCIbJc>.

4. Forlano, Laura, Molly Wright Steenson, and Mike Ananny, eds. “Prototypes, Products, and DIY Kits.” In *Bauhaus Futures*, 161–69. The MIT Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12044.003.0019>.

5. BBC.

6. BBC.



Double-exposure self-portrait of Marianne Brandt

In the preliminary course at the Bauhaus, Josef Albers and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy suggested Brandt be the first woman to join the metalworking department instead of continuing to study painting, yet she was initially basically hazed by her male colleagues, who made her do “endless repetitive and mundane tasks.” Eventually, she became the head of the Bauhaus’s metal workshop and then left it in the summer of 1929 to work in industry, still expressing in letters to Walter Gropius that she was frustrated at “being hemmed in by the outdated taste of her bosses,” who were possibly male. Brandt’s possibly most famous work is her 1927 *Tea Infuser, Model No. MT 49*. The Infuser is composed entirely of the aforementioned fundamental shapes, with its main brass body shaped like a hemisphere with cylindrical surfaces stacked on top of each other, a semicircular heat

resistant<sup>7</sup> ebony handle, and rectangular crossbar cradles on which the infuser rests<sup>8</sup>. It's relatively small, however, at just three inches in height from the bottom of the cradle to the top of its cylindrical knob, which comes from the efficient use of space for the infusing function of the pot—an example of a harmonious interplay between form and function. In 1923, a year before Brandt made the Tea Infuser, the Bauhaus adopted the slogan “Art into Industry” which encapsulated a change in direction for the Bauhaus, “stressing the importance of designing for mass production”<sup>9</sup>. Theoretically, then, the fact that this craft-produced object is made from simple shapes makes it a good candidate for mass-production.

7. Griffith Winton, Alexandra. “The Bauhaus, 1919–1933.” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2016.

[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/bauh/hd\\_bauh.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/bauh/hd_bauh.htm).

8. The Met. “Tea Infuser and Strainer,” 2021.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/491299>.

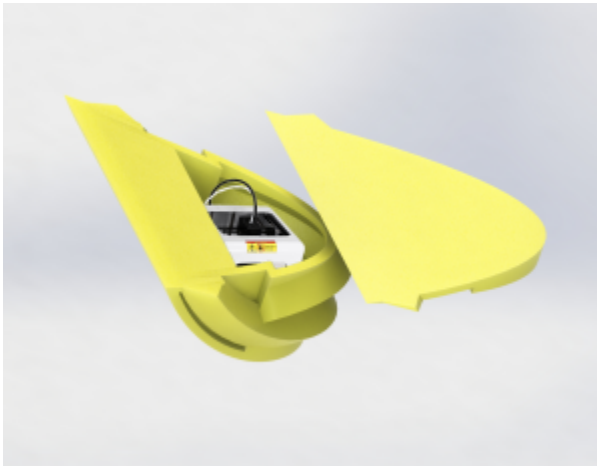
9. Griffith Winton.



Marianne Brandt's Tea Infuser, Model No. MT49

The most direct link I saw between the making process for the Tea Infuser and an assignment in class was in my [Time Capsule](#): not only is most computer-aided design software made specifically to develop mass-producible models, but the logic in said software is just as geometric as the Tea Infuser and the Bauhaus's design principles. To transform my Time Capsule from an idea to a physical 3D-printable model, the CAD software that I used, SolidWorks, required that I make extrusions and cuts to a material, each of which had to have a reference plane and reference dimensions. The geometry of each step of the modeling process ranged in complexity; the folds on the surface of the Time Capsule are triangles extruded around the curved edge of the surface using the Sweep function, while the bottom of the Time Capsule container is a polynomial curve which was used to cut

out half of a parabolic cylinder shape. To me, the Time Capsule is an indicator that while technology has significantly altered what the act of making *looks* like, it hasn't changed the *logic* or the *intent* of making much. In fact, the industrial-looking final product is reminiscent of the Bauhaus aesthetic of handmaking products to look like they've been industrially manufactured<sup>10</sup>, even though there's a 100+ year difference between the two objects.



Open time capsule with Fulcrum Minibot 3D printer Photoshopped inside

The Bauhaus sought to redefine the place of art and design in a turbulent, post-WWI German society by creating interdisciplinary work, and Brandt was a perfect example of an interdisciplinary maker. Before coming to the Bauhaus, she had studied multiple mediums of art, but this continued even after she became head of the Bauhaus's metal workshop. Her other work at the Bauhaus included photomontages (like her self-portrait

10. BBC.



at the beginning of this page) and visual collages, some of which promoted her metal workshop and others that were purely artistic<sup>11</sup>. I considered myself an interdisciplinary person long before I entered the Interdisciplinary Honors program at UW, having dabbled in photography, video production, and graphic design before being exposed to industrial design in high school. I've paid much more attention to the interdisciplinary nature of my work now that I'm taking classes and participating in organizations at UW which contrast significantly from each other, though. At the same time that I'm cranking out problems on beam deformations in my engineering classes and developing manufacturing plans for an accessible toy for HuskyADAPT, I make graphic designs and layouts for The Daily. These activities each exercise different parts of my knowledge, yet they all involve designing creatively and all are contributing to my development as a maker, not just someone who can crunch numbers in the right ways. Making is an art, but it isn't limited to art; in the same vein, engineering is a science, but it does not have to be limited to science.

11. Otto, Elizabeth, and Patrick Rössler. "Marianne Brandt." In *Bauhaus Women: A Global Perspective*, 80–85. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.



From Otto, "Marianne Brandt": *me* (short for "Metalwerkstatt," "metal workshop" in German), a 1928 photomontage on cardboard created by Brandt to promote the Bauhaus metal workshop

A traditionally stark difference between the concepts of making as engineering and making as art is in how large in scale the manufacturing of products that are results of a making process is. In my previous experience, art tended to be individually-produced in small quantities, while engineering referred to mass-production of standardized parts with very little deviation. Brandt's Tea Infuser bridges the gap between a manufactured object and an artistic design; however, it wasn't her only work that explored the relationship between mass-production and craft-production. Her aforementioned photomontages combined metallic surfaces, mirrors, and double-exposure techniques to "explore the relationship

of the camera ... to image creation"<sup>12</sup>. This is similar in nature to my work in this class, as I not only made an end product, but I also reveled in the experience of making and made conclusions about my relationship as a maker to said experience. On one hand, my [Waiting Room](#) project combined the industrial manufacturing technique of laser cutting with the essential craft that is sewing to create art that speaks about my literal and figurative place of mind. Just like Brandt moved between mediums multiple times in her life and symbiotically combined mediums in her work, I strengthened the meaning of sewed-together objects (a technique completely new to me this quarter) with familiar acrylic-cutting and gluing techniques to create my Waiting Room. Meanwhile, my Time Capsule is directly related to mass-manufacturing in everything but source; all of the individual components in my CAD model, as well as the time that it references (the scaling-up of 3D-printed face shield production at the UW), were solely the product of actions made by individual people, irreplicable by a computer. Therefore, in comparison to my previous examples of interdisciplinary work, my most direct connection to the interdisciplinary nature of art and design exists in this class. To successfully execute the ideas I had for art pieces, I had to not only understand how physical forms communicate ideas and feelings, but also the techniques of sewing, industrial machinery, and software that best fit the materials I wanted to construct my forms with. While technology has, again, significantly altered what the act of making *looks* like, it hasn't changed the *individualized, adaptive, and interdisciplinary* nature of making.

12. Otto, "Marianne Brandt."



"Waiting Room" on the ground at Red Square, in front of Suzzallo Library

The individualized creation of the Tea Infuser and other Bauhaus prototypes isn't without its detractors, though. Despite the Bauhaus's aforementioned focus on designing for mass-production in the mid-1920s, the Tea Infuser design's shape prevented it from being mass-produced, so it became a rare, luxurious item and it eventually sold in a 2007 Sotheby's auction for \$361,000<sup>13</sup>. My Time Capsule is, again, a great parallel to the Tea Infuser: even though it was designed to be mass-manufactured, it is a unique object in its intended use (besides the fact that I don't have the money to 3D-print hundreds or thousands of copies of the Time Capsule).

13. Rawsthorn, Alice. "The Tale of a Teapot and Its Creator." The New York Times. December 16, 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/style/16iht-design17.1.8763227.html>.

Furthermore, it could be considered a “socially engaged design”<sup>14</sup> since its form is a reference to how my engineering and design peers helped battle the COVID-19 pandemic in its early days, but its making and manufacturing processes aren’t accessible to everyone (especially considering the cost of 3D printing and acquiring CAD software). If objects like the Tea Infuser and my Time Capsule are meant to serve the masses, they fail at doing so by virtue of their individualized production; in the case of the Tea Infuser, it’s an ironic failure. In the words of scholars Denisa Kera and Joanne Pouzenc, the Tea Infuser “tries to reconcile the irreconcilable: the needs and desires for handmade and mechanical, luxury and mass-produced, disruptive and socially engaged design”<sup>15</sup>.

I’ve found it difficult to reconcile the luxurious and inaccessible realities of craft with both my goals of reducing the material impact objects have on the environment and my career aspirations of working with mass-produced consumer tech products. While I align with Brandt and the Bauhaus in their goal of elevating the working class through industrial design, I do all of my making with a \$2200 laptop on software that I either pay \$30 a month for or that is provided by the university that I am privileged enough to be able to attend. Just like artistic designs that are meant to be commonplace can be co-opted by wealthy people as a tangible asset for storing wealth, my engineering and design work can be effectively co-opted by tech billionaires and leave me solely as a slave to profits if I’m not careful enough in my career. I can just as easily co-opt the struggles of

14. Forlano, “Prototypes, Products, and DIY Kits.”

15. Forlano, “Prototypes, Products, and DIY Kits.”

those for whom I make and create an ineffective product. Ultimately, what good is my work—or any work, for that matter—if it only improves the quality of life for a few people, not everyone? Avoiding this requires empathy to be gained on the maker's end—not only for the people for whom something is being made, but for all sociopolitical, economic, cultural, physical, and emotional contexts in which the end product is going to exist.



Marianne Brandt's 1924 "Coffee and Tea Set," photographed by Lucia Moholy

The sources I looked at in my research on Brandt's work consider her Tea Infuser as an example of Gropius's 1923 slogan of "Art and Technology: A New Unity," similar to "Art into Industry," but they were conflicted on whether it reflected on the motto positively or negatively. Art historians Elizabeth Otto and Patrick Rossler argue that Brandt's metalwork "epitomizes" this slogan<sup>16</sup>. Meanwhile, Kera and Pouzenc argue that the Tea Infuser interprets the slogan "as a constant clash rather than

16. Otto, "Marianne Brandt."

unity of artistic (philosophical) experiments, industrial utility, and calls for social justice or revolution”<sup>17</sup>. Essentially, while the tea infuser was meant to aid the Bauhaus’s effort to “reform the working classes” through a luxurious experience of tea infusion, it actually reframed class differences in the lens of tea drinking. Kera and Pouzenc bring up “excesses of Silicon Valley prototypes and gadgets” as examples of class disparities reframed in mundane activities, including Juicero, the WiFi-connected juicer which was brought down completely by users discovering that they could press the juice out of the provided Juicero packets themselves.<sup>18</sup> Art and technology is an imperfect unity when it comes to craft since, as shown in the examples above, it too can be co-opted toward vapid use cases and away from meaning. The kind of careful thought that I put into materials and form choices for my Time Capsule and Waiting Room projects is similar to what makers who make an impact put into their work.

With that said, are the things that I made in this class worth any less because they aren’t functional in the traditional sense? Marianne Brandt made designs, but she also made art. In fact, her work at the Bauhaus is simultaneously design and art—it serves a purpose and communicates, in beautiful forms, to its viewers and users. It’s not like the turbulent context in which I live is unique, either, since the Bauhaus’s entire existence was contained within Germany’s first (albeit turbulent) democracy, while all of Europe tried to rebuild from a devastating war. The issues of self-expression, the fusion of art and craft, and the simplification/democratization

17. Forlano, “Prototypes, Products, and DIY Kits.”

18. Forlano, “Prototypes, Products, and DIY Kits.”

of quality objects were as fundamental to Bauhaus makers as climate change and socioeconomic inequality are to me and my peers. There's more to making than using skills to produce efficiently; my work in this class may be an example of the interdisciplinary nature of art and design, but because I'm so efficiency-oriented as a person and because the profession that I am graduating into is so efficiency-oriented, I often struggled with reflecting upon how it *feels like* to make and what my process and end product say about me and the context in which I live. My Waiting Room piece is just as important as my engineering drawings to the world, even though the latter is clearly functional and the former isn't—my classmates related to the feelings of isolation, superposition, and being “stuck” in multiple ways that I expressed in Waiting Room. There are times where being an efficient maker is important, like when attempting to mass-3D-print face shields for healthcare workers, but those times aren't “always.”

While some things about making are different between Marianne Brandt's time and my time (especially in the technology both of us use(d) in our making processes), many crucial facets of being a maker have stayed the same. Makers who make an impact can, and should, make with practicality and a *message* in mind, not just functionality. They are adaptable, constantly learning, adjusting, and iterating on their own skills to create forms that have meaning. They also consider the impact of an object long after it's created, even if they can't control all parts of their receptions by the public. Furthermore, just like how the response to the issues of 1920s Germany and the creation of “building of the future” required interdisciplinary thinking and



collaboration, the response to the issues of my time has already required collaboration between policy experts, climate scientists, engineers, activists, artists, and designers, some of whom fit multiple categories mentioned here. Makers who make an impact are interdisciplinary *by necessity*. These considerations are what make our interactions with designed objects and crafted art positive, and the world a better place to live.

Marianne Brandt was a maker who made an impact. I will, too.

### Media Attributions

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# 11

## LARA O'DONOGHUE ON WASSILY KANDINSKY

*Lara Grace O'Donoghue is a junior, double majoring in Philosophy and Law, Societies & Justice at the University of Washington. She primarily works with oil paint and ink but has recently become interested in textiles. Her current research is about the connection between art and the human condition and, in time, she hopes to attend law school to continue her exploration of human morality and behavior.*

*Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was a Russian painter and art theorist. He was deputy director and a teacher at the Bauhaus, where he conducted classes on abstract form, color, and analytical drawing in the preliminary course from 1925 to*

1933.<sup>1</sup> He also created published books such as ‘Concerning the Spiritual in Art’ in his development of art theory.<sup>2</sup>



Portrait of Wassily Kandinsky / Photo: Hugo Erfurth, 1925–1928

I have always been concerned with the question of what motivates human beings. Whether our actions are positive, negative, shocking, or wholly anticipated, I believe that they remain informed in all instances, nonetheless. It is the case, therefore, that I wanted to

1. Guggenheim Museum, “Kandinsky at the Bauhaus, 1922-1933”, September 10 2010, <https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/kandinsky-at-the-bauhaus-1922-1933>
2. Bauhaus Kooperation, “Wassily Kandinsky”, <https://www.bauhauskooperation.com/knowledge/the-bauhaus/people/masters-and-teachers/wassily-kandinsky/>

explore the possibility that art could have an effect on our actions and behavior. In deciding whom I wished to research, then, I placed a major emphasis on my own reaction to the works of various artists. Very quickly, I was drawn to Wassily Kandinsky. In a breath, I was in awe of his command of color; his ability to create such satisfying and complimentary compositions from seemingly random elements immediately caught my eye. This ability to elicit emotion through the careful use of lines, shapes, and planes is something to be spoken for. In particular, this provokes me to think critically about how abstract art can convey a clear message and allows me to construct a path to uncovering answers concerning art's capacity to influence.

My own artwork, since having been exposed to Kandinsky, is certainly influenced by abstraction but is far more representational in its final form. Given this, I want to explore the transition from the abstract to the representational in three questions. The first being the question of how art can map the unknown features of the human condition. Secondly, I wish to address how abstract art can be used as a tool to convey explicit messages. Lastly, I seek to uncover how art can instigate behavioral changes and reshape the views of society. In doing so, I will draw a clear connection between art and human behavior. In this chapter, I will be providing examples of both my own artwork and Kandinsky's, and I will analyze them to illustrate the techniques I am describing and to explain how they are relevant to the questions I have posed.

My first port of call is to address how Kandinsky approached art in itself and, in order to do so, it is imperative to understand the context of his time and of

his roots. In his earlier, more representational works, it is clear to see that he was already extremely interested in bold and bright colors. He was influenced stylistically by “Henri Matisse and the Fauves”, but more significantly, by spirituality.<sup>3</sup> It is this spirituality that seemed to guide Kandinsky’s perspective on the world as it exists externally and also in those things which we cannot grasp by sight alone. Whereas the creative forces which exist in nature seem to function in terms of the “principle of concentric construction”, the creative forces in art follow an “uncentered construction”<sup>4</sup>. In other words, Kandinsky utilized art as a means of uncovering the unknowns of nature. What I intend to learn from this, then, is what we can assert to be the unknown features of the human condition.

I posit that the unknown features of the human condition are those elements of our being most ‘abstract’ and subjective within ourselves. In their rawest form, these would be emotions. However, emotions inform so many facets of our being which are equally as unknowable from an external perspective. Our implicit biases, our non-logical emotional-behavioral responses, our unconscious beliefs and our motivations are all enveloped in this world of uncentered construction. Now, a colleague of Kandinsky’s at the Bauhaus, Johannes Itten, is also known for his study of art and color theory with an emphasis on the spiritual, but there is something especially unique about Kandinsky that

3. Christie’s, “Wassily Kandinsky: The road to abstraction”, October 10 2017, <https://www.christies.com/features/Wassily-Kandinsky-10-things-to-know-8600-1.aspx>
4. Michel Henry, “Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky”, 2009, April 15, Bloomsbury Publishing, London/ New York, Page 139

provides a means to move from the abstract to the explicit and representational. Kandinsky had a sensory disorder known as synesthesia. Synesthesia blends the senses to create a form of sensory experience that most of us aren't privy to. Kandinsky was known to experience sound and color at the same time and, because of this, was able to provide us with his objective measure of the emotional;

**“the sound of colors is so definite that it would be hard to find anyone who would express bright yellow with bass notes, or dark lake with the treble.” – Wassily Kandinsky.<sup>5</sup>**



Taut at an Angle, author: Wassily Kandinsky, 1930

5. Renée B. Miller, “Wassily Kandinsky’s Symphony of Colors”, Denver Art Museum, March 19 2014, <https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/blog/wassily-kandinskys-symphony-colors>

Using color as a metric for emotion, it is easier to comprehend how art can map the human condition. According to Kandinsky, yellow has the ability to disturb and blue awakens the highest spiritual aspirations.<sup>6</sup> In this way, we can see how color can not only convey to the viewer the emotions of the artist but can actually translate these emotions onto them. This is something I built upon in my art piece ‘anxiety’ which I created for my midterm assignment in Honors 211. As you can see below, there is a large triangular shape in my piece which appears to be black. However, upon closer inspection, the fabric is actually a dark navy plaid. This was an intentional decision informed by Kandinsky’s color theory, as I wanted to provoke viewers to double-take and experience a moment of confusion. Not only did this relay my own emotions to them, but my art was able to use color to encode emotional information, a feature I implemented based on Kandinsky’s techniques in his own artwork.

6. Renée B. Miller, “Wassily Kandinsky’s Symphony of Colors”, Denver Art Museum, March 19 2014, <https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/blog/wassily-kandinskys-symphony-colors>



Photograph of "Anxiety", by Lara O'Donoghue, Textiles, In progress.

Color was not the only aspect of Kandinsky's art that played a key role in conveying explicit information. Particularly during his time at the Bauhaus, he created incredible compositions using lines and shapes, geometric shapes being especially dominant in his pictorial vocabulary.<sup>7</sup> It is important, at this point, to situate Kandinsky further within his historical context. He was creating art at a time when collaging was very prominent and even informed further experimental art such as the *matières* produced at the Black Mountain College. In a sense, collaging is exactly what Kandinsky was doing with various compositional elements when painting. He was seeking to uncover a universal aesthetic language with overlapping flat planes and delineated forms.<sup>8</sup> In his abstract work, the lines and shapes bare

7. Guggenheim Museum, "Kandinsky at the Bauhaus, 1922-1933", September 10 2010, <https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/kandinsky-at-the-bauhaus-1922-1933>

8. Guggenheim Museum, "Kandinsky at the Bauhaus, 1922-1933", September 10 2010, <https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/kandinsky-at-the-bauhaus-1922-1933>



no specific relationship to the plane upon which they are painted, thus creating the illusion that such elements are floating. Consider the following composition by Kandinsky and notice how the seemingly disjointed and random components all work together to create a sense of depth.



Small Worlds, author: Wassily Kandinsky, 1922

So, if we apply the removal of functions, we can take one step closer to conveying an explicit message. For example, if we strip something of its representational roles in order to understand 'untouchable tonality', we are able to convey a message that is, in turn, representational of our own untouchable features such

as emotions.<sup>9</sup> I began with this concept when deciding the relational composition of my midterm project. My goal was always to create a literal message by translating my own emotions onto the viewer. I have explained how I used color to achieve this in part, but I also played with the concepts of Kandinsky's aesthetic language. One message I wished to convey was that of discomfort, so, I used a representational image of a human heart and then sewed a second along a right-shifted plane. In doing so, I was able to manipulate the viewer into experiencing their own form of discomfort as they tried to come to grips with the almost 3D-effect I had created. This transition towards the representational from the basis of abstraction has led me one step closer to understanding the relationship between art and its ability to manipulate our behavior.

9. Michel Henry, "Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky", 2009, April 15, Bloomsbury Publishing, London/ New York, Page 38



Photograph of "Anxiety", by Lara O'Donoghue, Textiles, In progress.

In order to answer my final question, of how art can instigate behavioral changes and reshape the views of society, I must first explain what Kandinsky believed the purpose of art to be. His view was that, in its simplest terms, art must disclose something to the viewer. It follows, then, that Kandinsky's work restores the emotions of the universe upon being viewed.<sup>10</sup> I argue, however, that there is one key element that is required to disclose some explicit message through applying the concepts of abstract art: interaction. I believe that, if we are to create societal change via the means of art, it is not enough that such art merely exists or is viewed in passing. At the Bauhaus, Kandinsky conducted a wall

10. Michel Henry, "Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky", 2009, April 15, Bloomsbury Publishing, London/ New York, Page 38

painting workshop, which illustrates one way in which Kandinsky's art could be interacted with. Wall art is large, imposing, and a feature of everyday life. As such, its role becomes somewhat of a performance and has the power to sow seeds of suggestion upon the viewer. A more literal example of performance created by Kandinsky is his performative art piece, 'The Yellow Sound', which addresses directly the relationship between color and sound that he experienced due to his synesthesia.



Photograph of Kandinsky's "The Yellow Sound (Der Gelbe Klang)"

11

This final component, interaction, allows the viewer to internalize and reflect on the unmapped features of their being, which have been manipulated by the artist. An 'interaction' does not have to be as bold as taking part in or viewing a performance, however. I developed my midterm project, 'Anxiety', to be a piece that had to be worn. The act of wearing clothing is an interaction, so

11. Amanda Brown, "Photograph of Kandinsky's "The Yellow Sound (Der Gelbe Klang)""", Guggenheim Museum, December 16 2009, <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/findings/photograph-of-kandinskys-the-yellow-sound-der-gelbe-klang>

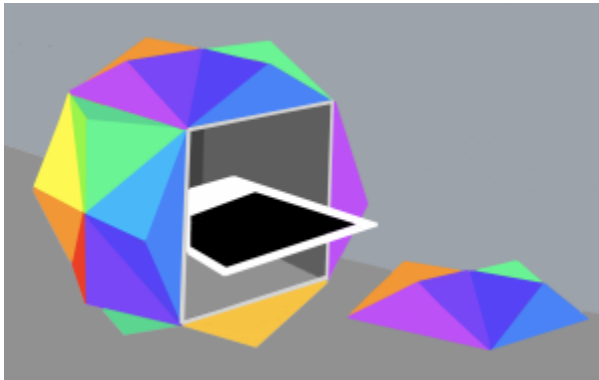
too is being forced to consider why such art exists on that clothing in the first place. For my time capsule project in Honors 211, I created an interaction that was a happy medium between covert and explicit interaction.



Artist Lara O'Donoghue wearing "Anxiety", 2021, Photograph by Cooper Rosner

The time capsule I designed was sleek, modern, and minimalist, but once you embark on the act of opening it, you are confronted with a very clear message. The physical design of the capsule is juxtaposed with the contents within it, to create a sense of urgent panic in the viewer. Within the capsule, polaroid photographs displaying the most impactful images from 2020-21 are enclosed. Again, I specifically chose the medium of polaroid to add another layer of semi-representational messaging; the irony of my generation's obsession for

90's nostalgia, coexisting with the COVID-19 pandemic. I wanted this messaging to be so jarring, so much so that this emotional manipulation is taken to the extent of influencing change.



Lara O'Donoghue's Time Capsule Design, constructed using Rhino 7, 2021

So, I have addressed three major components of art which I believe can, if applied correctly, influence behavioral and societal change. In using concepts based on abstractionist art theory and adapting these practices to work alongside the representational rather than in contrast to it, it is possible to elicit strong emotional responses in the viewer. Color, composition, and interaction are integral components of this process, and I have come to understand them through both my own perspective and through the study of Wassily Kandinsky. That being said, I believe we have seen this very practice used time and time again.

In the 21st century, this manipulation of art is a core ingredient in maintaining consumerist culture. Marketing relies heavily on this process; grocery stores are designed to place essential items at the back of the

store whilst you are bombarded with bold colors and carefully tailored displays. Using the three techniques of careful color consideration, element composition, and method of interaction, we can be lulled into adapting our consumption behavior to fit a rhetoric that is being placed upon us. Similarly, the act of protesting oftentimes involves these techniques in an attempt to inspire social change – colorful placards, bold text, and a collage of different people joining together for one cause. I believe that these practices, although not new, are indicative of the truth behind the power of art to motivate change. Likewise, I believe through my research on Wassily Kandinsky, I have successfully uncovered why these techniques work. Art has the ability to map the unknown features of the human condition, abstract art can convey explicit messages, and when we combine this information together, art is capable of reshaping the actions and views of society.

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# 12

## MEGAN PLUNKETT ON JOHN CAGE

*Megan (she/her) is a junior in the University of Washington Honors Program. She is studying Information Sciences, and would like to venture into the realm of user experience and interface design. Doing this, she hoped to bridge the disparity gaps that arise as a result of technological advancement. Personally, Megan illustrates in her free time, raises plants, and takes the occasional trip to The Container Store.*

*Megan has chosen to analyze John Cage for her final project in HONORS 211. John Cage, a pioneer of the 20th century, led other artists as a teacher at the Black Mountain College, mastered the concept of “prepared piano”, and one of the greatest avant-garde composers of the 20th century. In her analysis and letter, Megan will question Cage on the*

*preservation of sound and time, the line between defying musical norms and “no rules”, will compare Cage’s work to her studies in the HONORS 211 course, and more.*

**Preface** (course overview, letter overview, and clarification)

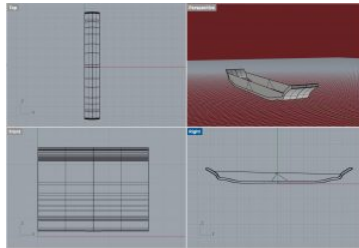
In the HONORS 211 course, I was challenged in ways I never expected. My initial idea for our first project (“Waiting”) was to provide a concrete example of what I do when I wait. This idea was quickly challenged, as our professor Timea informed me that it was not representative of waiting in its truest form. My idea was constructed, broad, and lacking of authenticity and depth. The truth of it was... Timea had found my secret: I am a creative and artist with an unfortunately powerful right-brain that keeps me from being impulsive. After being in a course for a mere few weeks, I was stripped to my core. I then took what I had learned and created a baby’s mobile- free of thought, mundanity, and monotony.

I thought of John Cage- his balance of bending norms while keeping a certain level of logic. When asked who I wanted to analyze and write to in a letter, I already knew.

In my letter, I hope to address my shortcomings in both my “Waiting” Project and CAD Project, ask Cage about his own experience with balancing logic, norms, and authentic creativity, and lastly look at him through the lens of any modern artist. Where does Cage stand in relation to them?



Megan Plunkett, "Waiting", 2021, Memorabilia, Wire, and Clothes Pins



Megan Plunkett, "Time Capsule", 2021, CAD design software

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### **Letter**

Dear John (Mr. Cage),

#### **Foreword:**

Though this letter is for a class, it is a true representation of what I would write to you. Every question and every opinion is with 100% curiosity and authenticity.

Hi. My name is Megan Plunkett and I am a student

at the University of Washington. I first heard your piece “4’33”” while in a musicianship course in high school. Unfortunately, I failed the test, and had very little to write about it in my music journal. I talked about how it was silent, confusing, and that perhaps the thoughts in my very own mind about its emptiness were the true meaning of the piece. Retrospectively, this is a quite selfish thought. I never once contemplated that, perhaps, the sounds around me are what I should be listening to—the sniffles and shuffles of my classmates or the clicking of my professor’s computer keys...”. For that, I apologize and hope that I can prove my interest by showing you my research on your work, and comparing it to pieces I have done over the course of this quarter. There are two—the “Waiting” project and the CAD project. I find there are many overlaps in theme between the two assignments and some of your pieces. I will delve into that soon. Lastly, I wanted to share that I will leave some parts of this letter open-ended, as I wanted to get your thoughts on a couple art-related topics and opinions of modern day musicians.

My main questions at hand (for later reference are):

- Part 1: You are known for your impeccable manipulation of objects and instruments. However, you simultaneously search to find the “spirit” of objects and, in a way, preserve a part of them and their purpose. Where do you draw the line at preserving, while manipulating instruments’ and objects’ functions? How can you justify finding a “spirit” or connection between object and sound, while deconstructing its natural sound? How do you maintain the memory of their origin?

- Part 2: I took part in a CAD project, where I created a container using computer program software. Though sometimes I felt creative, other times, I felt like a cog in a wheel. How do you draw the line between inspiration from others and authenticity?
- Part 3: Modern music prides itself in being a shared experience between the artist and the audience. I'm sure this is something you can understand from your own works. However, is the predictability what makes it authentic or are modern artists diving too far into societal norms?

### **Part 1: “Waiting”, Preservation, and Manipulation**

I would like to begin by addressing our “Waiting Project”. For this assignment, we were tasked with finding our own interpretation of waiting. What does it feel like? How can you represent this through art?

While in the process of deciding what to do for the project, I was helping my dad move house. The move was quite symbolic, as we had to clean out objects from my childhood and part way with the home I lived in from birth until I graduated high school. This house was lived in by 5 people. My growth was marked on the inside of my closet and my siblings’ and I’s bedrooms had layers of paint- documenting the phases we grew through as we formed out beings. For the project, I decided to construct a child’s mobile, using objects from my childhood as a means of preserving objects that were “waiting for me” to reuse them. I too was waiting- to peacefully depart with a house and a life while I travel into more formative

years. A highlight of this assignment for me was creating a preservation of time.

I noticed this is also a common theme in your work. In the book [Through The Looking Glass: John Cage and Avant-Garde Film](#), author Richard H. Brown says, “Cage turned to a primitive, perhaps regressive, technological approach to the “spirit inside objects” through the simple kinetic–mechanical act of percussion” (Brown 2019). Herein lies the fundamental connection between my project and your work: I took objects of a certain use (e.g. candles for burning, twine for picture hanging, etc.) and repurposed them, while simultaneously preserving their memory. My old objects became a mobile, which brings my childhood full circle, and the mobile now hangs in my dad’s music room. You too take objects and manipulate their original purpose to create art. The most classic example of yours that comes to mind is [“Sonatas and Interludes”](#), where nuts and bolt were so meticulously placed into parts of a classical piano (Hawley 2019).

Again, you too took the purpose of both the piano, and the object manipulating it, and changed both of their purposes. I find myself curious, because I used my old objects to create a new symbolic object, whereas you took old objects/objects of another function, and made an intangible concept and brought it to the present. This is where we begin to differ. I guess I’m wondering how you balance the idea of preserving an object’s spirit while changing its purpose to create something so... non-lasting?

## **Part 2: CAD, Authenticity, Objects and Sounds**

I also did a computer-aided design (CAD) project where I used 3D printing software to build myself a gondola, full of objects that I would put into a time

capsule. To summarize, I chose art (for its everlasting quality), flowers (for its mortality but eternal beauty), and magazine (for a positioning of our time). I put a lot of thought into my project, but still struggled with the idea that I was using someone else's system. How organic can my work be if someone built this computer and built this software and built the program I used (Rhino) and named the program functions I am clicking on? Where does it stop being contrived and start being authentic? Where does it stop being not just freedom to create, but a true masterpiece of your own work? I know you became an assistant to Oskar Fischinger, and that he was the inspiration behind you taking objects, finding their spirit, and setting them amongst other tools to explore their spectrum of sound. You studied the relationship between objects and sounds. My question to you regarding this is: How do you balance this inspiration and authenticity? You are known to have paved the way for other artists, but are also outspoken in your inspiration from people like Arnold Schoenberg and Oskar Fischinger (Cage, 1990). Your work is that of soul-searching, norm-bending, and yet you admit inspiration for other artists that are, arguably, similar to you in style.

### **Part 3: Modernizing, Predicting, and Experiencing**

My last inquiry for you has to do with modern music. The top-charting music (especially pop) are known for having semi-predictable lyrics, chord progressions, and stories shareable with audiences. "The four chords", as you know, crosses over several modern genres (e.g. pop, country, and hip-hop) to provide modern audiences with an easy listening experience. Even artists like Ed Sheeran, known for creativity and fluidity between the pop and alternate genres, often uses the four chords to attract

listeners. He then reels them in further with his lyrics, diversity in tempo, timbre, etc. Despite “the four chords” making listeners’ experiences perhaps less anxiety-inducing, I wonder if creatives like you find it frustrating, because these pieces feel like a copy, or an inauthentic or overtold story.

Do you find that modern musicians are sticking to social norms and that the real creativity comes from interpretations and experiences of listening? Or does modern music bend too much, in your opinion, to societal norms, making it lose authenticity?

### **Conclusion:**

To say I am a fan of your work is a gross understatement. I have enjoyed posing these questions to you as a listener, a fan, an admirer, and wonderer. You have paved the way for artists, musicians, thinkers, writers, philosophers, and I hope you know your impact is boundless.

Thank you!

Megan

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### Media Attributions

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- “Time Capsule” © Megan Plunkett

# 13

## YUNA SHIN ON RUTH ASAWA

*Yuna Shin is an interaction design student at UW. She is interested in applying the design and storytelling process to reimagine how we can create more inclusive and resilient systems. Currently focused on how design research methods and contemporary art practices and intervene as tools for speculation. Her favorite days are when she can mull over her ideas through writing or crafting.*

*Ruth Asawa (American, 1926–2013) was an Asian-American sculptor based in California. Born to Japanese Immigrants, Asawa spent time in interment camps. Later in life, she traveled to Mexico City to study Mexican and Spanish art that influenced her wire sculpting technique. She attended Black Mountain College to pursue her art studies. Today she is most known for her airy wire sculptures and her activism in art education.*

## **Part 1: A Reflection on Ruth Asawa's Wire Sculptures**

In the first part, I begin by delving into Asawa's upbringing and transformative milestones that have informed her making process. I further comment and analyze the learnings from projects in Honors 211 course in a letter format in the second part.

The more I read about the Japanese-American Artist Ruth Asawa the more I felt the relevancy of her artwork in terms of my own experiences as a Korean-American. An exploration into her work today reminds me of how little things can change over a few decades. Are we bound to make the same mistakes? It feels like it is. Is it destined that future generations will feel the same gut-punch I feel in unjust and discriminatory situations? How we must change, yet how little we do. Asawa's artwork is here to outlast time for new generations like mine to continue this complex, wiry conversation.

### **Ruth Asawa From the Beginning: Not So Different From Today**



"Japs Keep Moving – This is a White Man's Neighborhood." Photo courtesy of the National Japanese American Historical Society.

Before her arrival to the Black Mountain College in the summer of 1946, Asawa was born in Norwalk, California. Her parents were immigrants from Japan and felt the pressures of discriminatory laws against the Japanese. They were unable to

own land, become American citizens, or dream beyond becoming truck farmers (Asawa, "Life," N.D.). Asawa's upbringing during the Great Depression with the stock market crashes led her family to struggle due to the unfavorable economy and persistent discrimination against Japanese. The immigrant struggle and climb to a top that felt ever-so at the brick of being a destination of illusion.

These moments of stillness at the farm, financial limitations, and traumatic dispositions due to discrimination stayed with Asawa throughout her artistic career. The bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese in December 1941 led the United States to declare war on Japan (La Force, 2020). President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 which led to the eviction of 120,000 men, women, and children of Japanese ancestry in the West Coast and be placed in concentration camps (La Force, 2020). Her father, Umakichi, was arrested and sent to a Justice Department Camp in New Mexico during February 1942 (Asawa, "Life," N.D.).

For the second time, her family packed up their lives again to the Bayous of Arkansas and the Rohwer War Relocation Center. They were imprisoned with over 8,000 other Japanese-Americans. The prospects of a better future for the Asawa family was diminished. Rather the days were more in the present with little forms of delight. In the Arkansas soil, families planted gardens that thrived. Asawa's mother socialized with other women at the camp and got her hair permed for the first time which were activities not accepted at their previous farm life (La Force, 2020). A focus on the little forms of delight from the mundanity of everyday life can be exemplified in her creative process.

## Don't Underestimate Seemingly Humble Materials: Black Mountain College



Ruth and Ora Williams, 1946. Photo from "Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa," by Marilyn Chase, published by Chronicle Books, 2020.

In 2021, there's new levels of racism that people of Asian descent are experiencing (La Force, 2020). These experiences felt by Asian American communities in the United States is one that towers over individuals

in silence. Asawa's biomorphic-like wire sculptures reminds me that our emotions, however mighty and weak they may be, don't have to be consolidated as something stiff and fear-inducing like metal wire. Rather, they can be transformed into an airy, dynamic, and hauntingly beautiful wire sculpture to be displayed for everyone.

Asawa did just that during her time at the Black Mountain College — quite literally taking her internal experiences and materializing them by expelling it outwards. She was eligible for early release from the concentration camp. This led her to enroll as a student in 1946 at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina and eventually study there for three years. A college where progressive ideals, experimentation, and individualized education was at the center of the curriculum. Students were responsible for their own education (Asawa, "Black Mountain College," N.D.). During these formative years in her artistic career, she had influential teachers that impacted her making

process. In a video interview, Asawa describes the influences of her artistic inquiries that she embarks on, “Bucky and Alber’s had a lifetime commitment not interested in ideas that were solved; they were only interested in ideas that didn’t have a shape yet” (Synder, 1978). The wire sculptures that Asawa became known for were nonexistent shapes that morphed into one entity to the next — giving shape to the abstract and messy.

## **Part 2: Further Revelations in the Making Processes**

Dear Ruth Asawa,

As I look at images of your iconic biomorphic-like wire sculptures I feel a rhythm in the craftsmanship. The repetitive and meditative motion of tediously forming an “inside out” shape with just one technique. I underwent a similar performative making process where it was just my hands and the tension that I pulled at that determined the fate of what I was making. The uneven and soft basket I made for the “Waiting Assignment” for class is similar in a voluminous sculpture made from one repetitive technique.



Left image: In-progress picture; Yuna Shin, *Duality*, 2021. Rope, yarn, t-shirt, felt, and thread.  
 Right image: The artist forming a looped-wire sculpture in 1957. Photograph by Imogen Cunningham. Credit Imogen Cunningham; © The Imogen Cunningham Trust. From "Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa," by Marilyn Chase, published by Chronicle Books, 2020



Left image: Yuna Shin, *Duality*, 2021. Rope, yarn, t-shirt, felt, and thread. Right image: Ruth Asawa, *Untitled (BMC.95, In and Out)*, ca. 1946-49. © THE ESTATE OF RUTH ASAWA/ ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/ COURTESY THE ESTATE OF RUTH ASAWA AND DAVID ZWIRNER

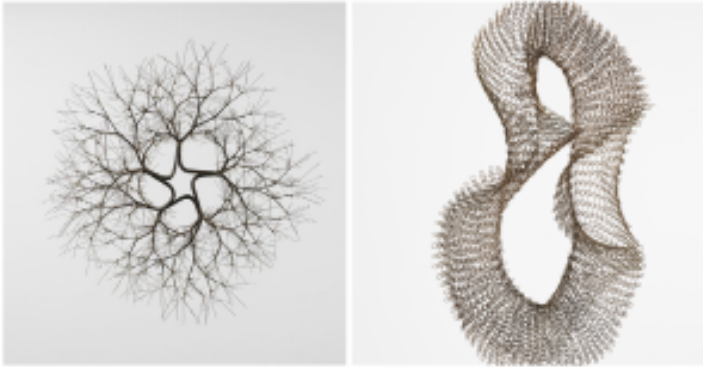
The basket with the soft t-shirt material protruding at the rim contrasts the tightly blanket stitched body that holds a quilt with a tessellation arrow motif. The black and white quilt reminds me of one of your early works at the Black Mountain College titled

"Untitled (BMC, In and Out), ca. 1946-49 (Selvin, 2020). With my assignment, I wanted to emphasize the internal dilemmas we have while waiting — a feeling of a push or pull. Where were your arrow-shaped forms pointing or leading towards? What were you waiting for in anticipation while you painted this in your Black Mountain College studies? This repetitive geometry is seen throughout your work as you progressed in your

career. The abstracting from materials in your work and my basket triggers the viewer to transport meaning for themselves into the works.

In your hanging wire sculptures, you push the limits of the material at hand. You simultaneously made the wire evoke a sense of coldness, danger, and rebelliousness. Whereas on the sculpture pictured on the right creates an illusion of motion, flexibility, and roundness. You mentioned in an interview how you let the material do the expressing while you stand back like a parent allows the child to express himself (Synder, 1978). There's a rebellious quality to your art practice that can be connected to the Black Mountain College culture that you have the right to do anything you want to do. Who says this material has to be used for this purpose? The organic form of your sculptures resist the urge to conform. Similarly, my "Waiting" basket pulls back and resists the tug of someone as the quilt is being pulled out.





Left image: Ruth Asawa, Untitled (S.452, Hanging Tied-Wire, Five-Branched Form Based on Nature), ca. 1965.

© THE ESTATE OF RUTH ASAWA/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/COURTESY THE ESTATE OF RUTH ASAWA AND DAVID ZWIRNER Right image: Ruth Asawa, Untitled (S.066, Hanging Mobius Strip), ca. 1968.

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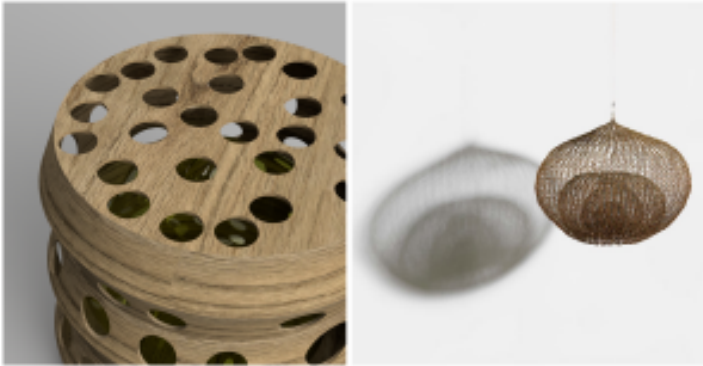


Row 1, 3, 4: Yuna Shin, Decaying Time Capsule, 2021. Digital rendering. Row 2: Yuna Shin, Duality, 2021. Rope, yarn, t-shirt, felt, and thread.

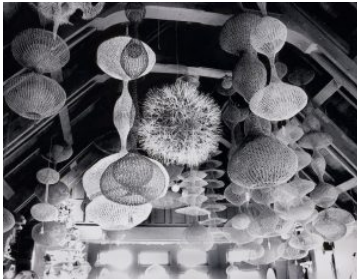
With my time capsule and “Waiting” basket sculpture that I made for class, I also focused on creating pairings that challenged the materials to simultaneously exist in more than one form. For my “Waiting” basket I used utility-purposed camping rope with soft neon knitting yarn. Together they formed a new shape and texture one that was firm and rigid yet malleable to the touch. The time capsule rendering I created uses an organic

wood casing that holds a cold glass container in a perfect circle. The meaning each material beholds innately from the start is not confined by that one connotation. Your work displays the duality and multi-faceted emotive qualities wire can have. You challenge what a utilitarian material such as wire often used for barbed wire fences like those at the concentration camp can be transformed into new imaginations.

A shadow is casted behind your hand looped-wire sculptures when hung from the ceiling at a gallery. The quality of the sculpture transforms depending on the position you stand. In the absence there's a new presence that forms. A common theme I see alive in your work is the seemingly limitless source of inspiration that can be found in the mundanity of everyday. As we wait for whatever may be on our minds at a single moment, there's beauty around us in the present. You were able to find the in-between moments of delight and curiosity from the dry and soulless landscapes in New Mexico that you were raised on during your childhood years at concentration camps.



Left image: Yuna Shin, *Decaying Time Capsule*, 2021. Digital rendering. Right image: The artist forming a looped-wire sculpture in 1957. Photograph by Imogen Cunningham. Credit...Imogen Cunningham; © The Imogen Cunningham Trust. From *"Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa,"* by Marilyn Chase, published by Chronicle Books, 2020



Sculptures by Asawa hanging from the Douglas fir rafters in the living room of her Noe Valley home in 1995. Credit Laurence Cuneo, courtesy of the Estate of Ruth Asawa and David Zwirner. Artwork © Estate of Ruth Asawa

My time capsule also  
riffs off the  
unpredictability and  
fate of the present  
moment. When you  
leave the porous  
wooden sculpture  
outside in a forest the  
role of nature takes  
over. In the absence of  
human interaction and  
protection the time  
capsule takes on its own

destiny. How far can the wood material itself go until it collapses and disintegrates into the soil? Conversely, how long before the shadow your wire sculptures create become hazy and nonexistent?

You also use this technique of starting from the inside and working your way outside when creating these wire sculptures. The result is a dynamic vessel that exists in

multiple forms at once. The “Decaying Time Capsule” and “Duality” artwork I created also have components that rest inside an object. From the glass circle inside the wood casing to the arrow quilt tucked inside the basket, there’s an emphasis on how different components are interconnected.

My time capsule captures the written stories and thoughts of today. You distill your past childhood curiosities fueled by simple delights into your airy wire sculptures. The process of making ends in a product that documents a story. I see a story of resistance and persistence. A story of an Asian-American woman who followed the path of seeking ways to not only express her own experiences but those around her. This can be seen through her activism within art education. Despite barriers due to her Japanese ancestry, you continued to make strides by opening the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts.



Ruth Asawa Forever® Stamps, 2020. © 2020 U.S. POSTAL SERVICE. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

A resurgence in popularity has been occurring lately with

your artwork. This is mainly due to the printing of your artwork on USPS postal stamps in the year of 2020. It was a year when the USPS was facing increasing pressure to stay afloat. The way tables have turned with your artwork saving the very system that put your family in concentration camps and discriminated against you because of your Japanese ancestry.

The photograph of the sculptures hanging from the living room of your Noe Valley home in 1995 showcases the breadth of sculptures you hand crafted. You never stopped creating or finding ways to nurture your innate passion for the arts. It might seem like you spent your childhood and early years waiting for the “American Dream” or a “better life,” but instead you were fully present. Just like the light and shadows being emitted from your wire-sculptures depending on the time of day and position you still remain despite any adversaries. It’s the ability to turn wire into characteristics that go beyond what it was intended for by conventional thought. It’s the hyper-awareness and calmness you channel through your works — transforming darkness into airy multi-dimensional organic wire sculptures where light can shine through.

I sense an artistic rebellion from your artwork that existed in a system where discrimination and racism thrived. A rebellion shaped by daring to live fully with every small pleasure casting its own shadow defining its own presence.

In wonderment,  
Yuna

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- "Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa," by Marilyn Chase, published by Chronicle Books, 2020

- Left image: In-progress picture; Yuna Shin, *Duality*, 2021. Rope, yarn, t-shirt, felt, and thread. Right image: The artist forming a looped-wire sculpture in 1957. Photograph by Imogen Cunningham. Credit Imogen Cunningham; © The Imogen Cunningham Trust. From “Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa,” by Marilyn Chase, published by Chronicle Books, 2020
- Left image: Quilt by Yuna Shin. Right image: Ruth Asawa, *Untitled* (BMC.95, In and Out), ca. 1946-49.
- Left image: Ruth Asawa, *Untitled* (S.452, Hanging Tied-Wire, Five-Branched Form Based on Nature), ca. 1965. © THE ESTATE OF RUTH ASAWA/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/COURTESY THE ESTATE OF RUTH ASAWA AND DAVID ZWIRNER  
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- Row 1, 3, 4: Yuna Shin, *Decaying Time Capsule*, 2021. Digital rendering. Row 2: Yuna Shin, *Duality*, 2021. Rope, yarn, t-shirt, felt, and thread.
- Left image: Yuna Shin, *Decaying Time Capsule*, 2021. Digital rendering. Right image: The artist forming a looped-wire sculpture in 1957. Photograph by Imogen Cunningham. Credit...Imogen Cunningham; ©

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“Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth  
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- Sculptures by Asawa hanging from the Douglas fir rafters in the living room of her Noe Valley home in 1995. Credit Laurence Cuneo, courtesy of the Estate of Ruth Asawa and David Zwirner. Artwork © Estate of Ruth Asawa
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# 14

## CHELSEA SHU ON GUNTA STÖLZL

*Chelsea is currently a senior studying Biochemistry and Global Health. Although she is working towards a career in medicine and social justice, she has always loved oil-painting, clay sculptures, and sketching. In the future, she hopes to use art to raise awareness about interpersonal violence.*

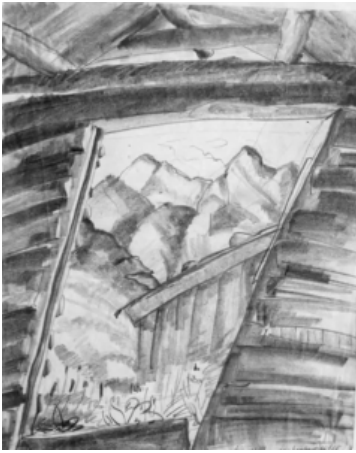
*Gunta Stölzl (1897-1983) was the first female master at the Bauhaus. She is known for her exploration of novel materials and incorporation of abstract art in traditional weaving practices.*



Portrait of Gunta Stölzl, 1920. Photograph

**Preface:**

Gunta Stölzl grew up surrounded by nature. Born in Munich, Bavaria, Stölzl had access to sprawling mountain ranges that served as inspiration for her early endeavors in art. Her parents encouraged exploration, allowing Stölzl to wonder the world freely alongside peers<sup>[1]</sup>.



Gunta Stölzl, Early Sketch, 1917. Pencil  
Stölzl, Early Sketch, 1917. Pencil



Gunta Stölzl, Early Painting, 1917. Watercolor

After serving as a nurse during the first World War, Stölzl re-immersed herself in the art world by enrolling in Kunstgewerbeschule, an arts and crafts school in Munich<sup>[2]</sup>. Dissatisfied with the conservative gender norms at the school, Stölzl pushed for reforms in the curriculum<sup>2</sup>. Stölzl's actions at the Kunstgewerbeschule was only the beginning of her reputation as a challenger of the status quo.

In 1919, Stölzl joined the Bauhaus for the institute's progressive ideals. In the Bauhaus manifesto, the school promised reforms and equality in working environments to female students. However, when Stölzl walked into

the school as a student, she was shuttled away to the struggling weaving department, the only sector in the Bauhaus that allowed women.

At the time, the Bauhaus was run by men that that believed weaving was “women’s work”<sup>[3]</sup>, a hobby that can be mastered with little effort. The prevailing attitude is best captured by the quote stated by Bauhaus master Oskar Schlemmer: “where there is wool, there is a woman who weaves, if only to pass the time.”<sup>[3]</sup>

However, Stölzl believed weaving can be an art form. Unlike her male teachers, she viewed the practice as “the unity of form, color, and substance”<sup>[4]</sup>. Taking advantage of the department’s lack of structure, Stölzl spearheaded a new curriculum that challenged the boundaries of creativity in fabric. With the help of women like Marianna Brandt, Benitte Otte, and Anni Albers, she used the discriminatory policy to create an environment of experimentation free from male oversight. Stölzl began to incorporate Bauhaus artistic principles in fabric, creating abstract designs that were previously absent from the craft. Additionally, she also wove novel materials into pieces, including cellophane, metal, and fiberglass. Beyond the weaving machine, Stölzl also encouraged collaboration between different departments. Her spirit was exemplified in her 1931 Bauhaus article, where she stated: “The vitality of the material forces people working with textiles to try out new things daily, to readjust time and again, to live with their subject, to intensify it, to climb from experience to experience in order to do justice to the needs of our time.”<sup>2</sup> Stölzl’s ambition led the weaving department to become the financial backbone of the Bauhaus and secured her position as the only female Master.

Stölzl's style and creative process is best illustrated in her work *Slit Tapestry Red/Green*. Composed of cotton, silk, and linen, the tapestry illustrates a colorful and dynamic landscape, similar to the ones Stölzl drew in her youth. Furthermore, the contrasting colors allude to Johannes Itten's teachings and the Bauhaus' trademark style. Unlike other weavers in the Bauhaus, such as Annie Albers, Stölzl was not afraid to use bold colors alongside a mixture of materials. Overall, Stölzl's tapestry serves as a landmark for her growth as an artist and her innovations in the weaving department.

In the final years of the Bauhaus, Stölzl unfortunately faced numerous hardships. For instance, her position as a new working mother drew negative attention from her male colleagues, who believed she should have abandoned her



Gunta Stölzl, *Slit Tapestry (Red/Green)*, 1927.  
String and Fiber



Anni Albers, *Study of Effect of Construction of Weave*, 1929. String and Fiber

professional career to raise her family<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, with increasing Nazi influence over German politics, Stölzl's Jewish nationality became a safety concern<sup>[5]</sup>. Through heartbreaks and misfortunes, Stölzl left her position at the Bauhaus prior to its dissolution to continue her passion. In the late stages of her life, she ran her own weaving mill in Zurich, Switzerland.

During her lifetime, Stölzl's incited revolutions within the textile and art worlds. She advocated for interdisciplinary collaboration and turned her struggles into breathtaking pieces. To her, "we people of today simply have not yet found the form for love and marriage; the same searching that is expressed in all of our work is simply the desperate longing for a new way of life."

### **Dear Gunta Stölzl:**

I am writing to you a century since your time at the Bauhaus. In 2021, technology has advanced to a point where art as a practice has been redefined. Now, computer algorithms and virtual classrooms aid traditional art techniques to help us turn ideas into reality. Although we live in two completely different millennia, I felt a connection with your words and art. I think of myself as old-fashioned, preferring hands-on work over digital projects. I was enamored by the organized chaos in your designs and how you were able to use textiles to breathe life into your work. Additionally, I can relate to your struggles as a woman in a male-dominated industry. However, I am writing to

you today to introduce you to my world while also asking a couple of important questions. To start, what did you mean when you said “the searching that is expressed in all of our work is simply the desperate longing for a new way of life”?

*I. Art and Exploration:*

When I read your quote, I interpreted it as a commentary on how art is a method of exploration. The animals I scribbled on printer paper in kindergarten ignited my curiosity for nature while the oil paintings in high school helped me navigate the twists and turns of adolescence. Each new art form I learned acted as a landmark for growth and maturity.



Chelsea Shu, *Smoke and Mirrors*, 2021. String and Fiber



Gunta Stölzl, Diary Entry, 1920. Watercolor

This was a project, named *Smoke and Mirrors*, I created for a class. The overall work centers around a ballerina trapped by broken mirrors. Similar to your creative process, I used this project to explore not only new materials but also new reflections on life. To start, I traded the familiarity of my paint brushes for pins and needles. I

challenged myself to emulate movement through fabrics like you have done in your work. I chose to use materials from traditional ballerina clothing, including ribbons, tulle, thread, and fabric. Although I did not have as much control over the colors as I would have with paint, these materials introduced me to new textures and dimensions. I purposefully used frayed fabrics to inform the viewer of the work's metaphor. The tulle I used furthered this sentiment. The overall composition of my work parallels your early paintings from the Bauhaus, utilizing lines and shapes to create a chaotic yet organized image.



In addition to learning about new media, I also had the opportunity to reflect on my own experiences. Through *Smoke and Mirrors*, I wanted to tell a story of freedom. The piece was inspired my roommate, who has danced professionally for most of her life. Her dance career confined her within walls of mirrors, a glass prison that amplified her insecurities and forced her to pick herself apart. I believed her story paralleled how millions feel today amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. With my new understanding of fibrous materials, I illustrated this story through methods that would not be possible with paints. For instance, the golden metal thread used to stitch the mirror pieces was inspired by *Kintsugi*, a Japanese practice where people use gold to mend broken pottery as a metaphor for pain being the origin of beauty. In my piece, golden threads connect the shattered mirror pieces to show how these distorted reflections we see in



Austin Cleon, *Kintsugi*, 2016. Photograph



Chelsea Shu, *Smoke and Mirrors*, 2021. String and Fiber

ourselves, although painful, will ultimately lead to growth. The connections are scattered rather than collected, referring to how easily it is to overlook the growth we experience from our hardships. The thread added dimension to the story and allowed me to further the narrative surrounding dance. While you may disagree with the storytelling component of my work since you focused more on utility and abstract designs, I think you can appreciate my exploration of materials. After completing this project, I now understand that the “longing for a way new way of life” alludes to our explorations in not only the art world but also life. Did you ever use your pieces to tell a story? Did they help you process your hardships?

## *II. Art and Technology:*

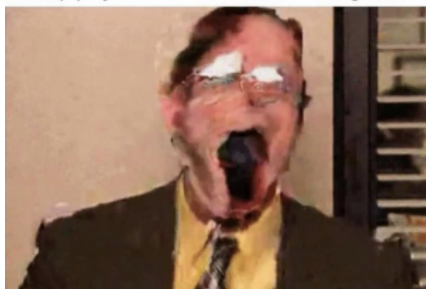
While I agree that art can be a form of exploration, I am curious to know if you think there is an end-goal to art. As an amateur artist in the 21st century and capitalist society, I have felt a constant pressure to produce even when I am uninspired. As a result, I have felt a loss of motivation on multiple occasions. I read about how your weaving projects were the main source of income for the Bauhaus. Did that ever feel exhausting? Did you at any point feel as if you were producing art just for monetary gain rather than expression? With burnout as a common phenomenon in my generation, people my age have turned to faster forms of art that can give instantaneous rewards. One defining example are memes. I think you may be confused on what exactly a meme is. In the words of Richard Dawkins, a meme is a unit of cultural

information spread by imitation<sup>[6]</sup>. For my generation, imitation is just another word for humor.



No one:

The teacher's internet the while they explain the 36-step project that's worth 75% of our grade:



*Various Artists, Memes, 2021. Digital*

I wanted to encapsulate how memes have become an art form that defines my fast-paced generation. Thus, I utilized computer software, a key art tool today, to design a time capsule.

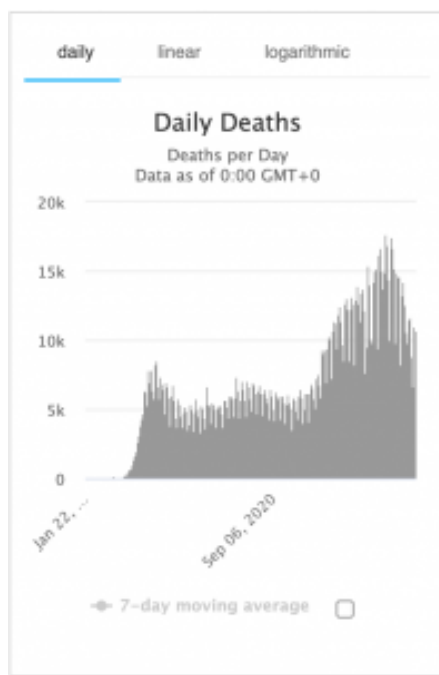


Chelsea Shu, Time Capsule, 2021. Digitally rendered on Fusion360



Chelsea Shu, Time Capsule, 2021. Digitally rendered on Fusion360

The main body of the time capsule is a globe orbited by the frame of a clock. The cylinders protruding from the center sphere are indications of time. However, instead of clock hands, I replicated the COVID-19 case statistics from 2020 to show the passing of time.

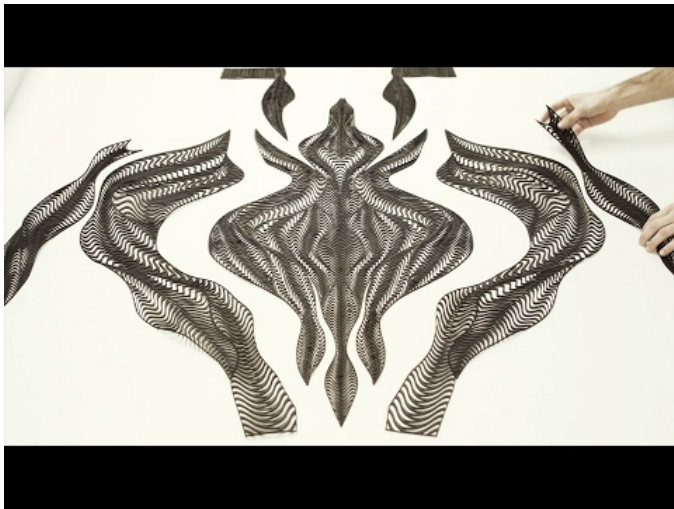


COVID-19 Numbers, Center for Disease Control, 2021.  
Digital

I wanted to fill the capsule with images of memes since they have been such a vital aspect of the virtual world and a defining component of my generation. During the creation process, I realized how, unlike weaving and painting, computer design software is less physical. As a results-driven person, I enjoy seeing my work come together. Even though I spent hours in front of my laptop hashing out the design, I still felt unsatisfied once the piece was complete since I couldn't hold it. Considering the manual labor required in weaving, you would agree with my sentiment. Designing through my laptop made me appreciate the physicality of traditional art at a new level. I am also curious to see how people decades from now will react to memes as works of art. I believe your art

pieces have withstood the test of time for their innovative concepts and designs, but I do not know memes can substantially influence art in the future. What are your thoughts?

My time capsule is only an instance of the vast possibilities technology has enabled in the 21st century. I think you would be overjoyed to see new ways artists have reinterpreted fabric creation and purpose. For instance, one of my favorite designers, Iris Van Herpen, has incorporated 3D printing into fabric work. Like how you collaborated with your peers in the weaving department at the Bauhaus to create new tapestries, Van Herpen works alongside artists, designers, and engineers to create unique fabrics made out of eccentric materials.



A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: <https://uw.pressbooks.pub/honors211artbook/?p=339>

I also love Van Herpen's work for its combination of

STEM and art. Using computer software and 3D printing, Van Herpen creates fabric out of malleable and rigid materials. As a result, her clothing pieces display diverse motions, ranging from flowing silk to structured 3D-printed dresses, that would not be achievable through traditional fabric techniques. An artist that takes this sentiment to the next level is Neri Oxman.



Silk Pavillion, Neri Oxman, 2013. Silkworms

Like you and Van Herpen, Oxman pushes the boundaries of fabrics. However, she achieves this by combining scientific principles. In 2013, Oxman created the *Silk Pavilion*, an artistic display created solely by silkworms influenced by the sun. Her idea resulted in an intricate geometric silk web that was completely calculated by math and biological principles. These women in art and science are able to achieve these incredible accomplishments because of change-makers like you, so I wanted to thank you for your efforts. If you were here



today, would you explore these new technologies or would stay with traditional art forms?

### *III. Art and Social Justice:*

Beyond technology, art itself has also evolved drastically in the past 100 years. The most significant change, in my opinion, is accessibility. No longer constrained to the walls of elitist schools and social groups, art has become an expression that anyone can learn and share. With this phenomenon, people from across the world have reinterpreted the purpose of traditional art forms. For instance, when you were at the Bauhaus, people viewed weaving and fabrics as a tool<sup>2</sup>. Today, the practice acts as a catalyst for social change. A defining example is the National AIDS Memorial Quilt. In the late 1900's, AIDS was a viral epidemic that devastated the LGBTQ+ community nationally. Due to stigma surrounding LGBTQ+ members, thousands passed away as a result of neglect from healthcare institutions. To honor the lives lost, Cleve Jones, a gay right activist, motivated fellow activists to create fabric panels for loved ones who died of AIDS. Jones then combined these pieces into a 54 ton quilt and displayed it in Washington DC. The project delivered a powerful statement that changed the minds of millions about the epidemic. As can be seen, with this new equality, art now holds tremendous social capital.



The AIDS Memorial Quilt, NAMES Project Foundation, 1992. Photograph

While the people who created these individual pieces may not have had your level of expertise, they worked alongside one another to achieve a common goal. Their collective efforts created an abstract work of art that almost resonates with the Bauhaus style. When I saw the aerial view of the quilt, the image immediately reminded me of the chairs you created with Marcel Breuer. Although the scale of these two projects are vastly different, they share the commonality of being the

product of collaboration. On one hand, you and Marcel brought together different departments within the Bauhaus. On the other hand, thousands of activists came together to honor a common cause. I believe working with one another in unity is a unique quality art possesses that transcends time.



The AIDS Memorial Quilt, NAMES Project Foundation, 1992. Photograph



Marcel Breuer and Gunta Stölzl, The Colorful Weave Chair, 1921, pear wood and woolen straps

#### *IV: Final Thoughts*

Throughout the past century, art has evolved in more ways than one. Accessibility and technology have both significantly improved, immersing the two of us in completely different worlds. On one hand, your works were completed with techniques passed down from masters and created for the purpose of utility. On the other hand, my pieces were created with expertise gained from virtual classrooms and brought to life for the sake of creative expression. However, our worlds still share common threads that have withstood the test of time. For instance, we both use our artwork as tools of exploration. Furthermore, art today is still grounded in your passion

for innovation, except now it is pushing boundaries with the help of science and mathematics. Seeing your constant longing for growth, I know you would love how the art world has developed.

Sincerely,  
Chelsea

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# 15

## ROSHNI SRIKANTH ON RUTH ASAWA

*Roshni Srikanth is a freshman studying Informatics at the University of Washington. She is a student in the Interdisciplinary Honors Program and is the Director of Diversity Efforts for WINFO (Women in Informatics). She is interested in studying technology, its interaction with culture, and sustainability.*

*Ruth Asawa (1926 – 2013) was a Japanese-American sculptor who mainly worked using wire to create hanging sculptures. She was a student at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina and went on to become an advocate for art education in San Francisco, where she helped found the San Francisco School of the Arts.*





Ruth Asawa with hanging sculpture

Dear Ruth Asawa,

My name is Roshni Srikanth and I am a freshman studying Informatics at the University of Washington. Currently, I am taking a class called “The Politics and Practice of Making: Art as a Tool for Creating Change”, and this quarter I had the chance to look at your life’s work and history, specifically in relation to what you learned at Black Mountain College. This letter is my attempt to connect some of the things I learned and created in this class to your philosophies in terms of artwork, looking at things through the lenses of history and education.

I believe that history informs the arts (and sciences) at almost every level. Whether it is the history of the maker, the history of the materials, the history of the content, or even the history of the method, the past often

becomes one of the most interesting points of discussion for a work of art. Looking at some of your most well-known works, especially the wire sculptures, I can see the different histories come into play. I was especially interested in your use of wire as the material for the sculpture. I see in it parts of your own history, of being sent to a concentration camp surrounded by barbed wire, or of growing up on a farm playing in the dirt and seeing those same lines show up in the wire forms you would make later. I firmly believe that every artist carries their history into their work, and they can use their work to acknowledge or critique their past experiences to great effect.

In addition to how your personal history has impacted your art, I am also interested in the history of your materials. As part of my class this year, I created a piece inspired by the word “Waiting” and I saw some similarities between our inspirations and efforts. For my project, I chose to make a *dhavani*, which is a traditional pleated piece of fabric that is worn draped over the shoulder. I wanted this piece to represent how my feelings about waiting have changed over time, from something repetitive and boring to something carrying more weight and anxiety. In my work, I am also inspired by my own history and tried my best to represent my history and culture in my work. Much of that history is in the designs I chose to use, but also in how the finalized piece is supposed to be worn. The flower at the very top of the *dhavani* is a small rose, and a little hard to notice, but I wanted it to represent the outcome of the waiting – that there might be a long process to get to the flower but it will bloom eventually. When my piece is worn, the flower actually ends up behind the shoulder

and out of the wearer's sight to represent that we might not even notice the things we are waiting for right away, we need to turn and see them. The traditional Indian clothing that I saw daily was a big part of how I chose the specific elements of my project. The colors of the cloth and the border really tie into that because red and green are a really common combination in South India. I also took inspiration from mirror work on clothing found in North India and used CDs for my project instead.

I chose to present my work as part of a complete outfit. The first way is by laying it out on the bed, kind of like the outfit is waiting to be worn. The second way I chose to present it is by actually wearing the outfit and taking pictures in different places where I would wait. Sitting on the sofa looking out the window, and at the door waiting (but unable) to go outside. Below is the link to a slideshow of my "Waiting" project and a few photographs I took of the finished project.

[Waiting](#)



Roshni Srikanth, "Waiting", 2021, Textiles, CDs, and Paint



Roshni Srikanth, "Waiting", 2021, Fabric and Photograph

One of the biggest limitations (that I imposed upon myself) was the fact that I only used materials that were ubiquitous objects around my house that were “waiting” to be used. As an example, the main piece of fabric that I used (the green blouse bit) was common in the way that blouse bits are often given as gifts to women attending various functions/celebrations. In this aspect of my project, I see some familiarity with your experiences too. The wire you use, seen as common, was because “[you] were so poor that [you] were taking materials that were around [you]... and using things that were natural rather than having good paper and good materials that [were] bought.”<sup>1</sup> My use of ordinary materials like old CDs,

1. Oral history interview with Ruth Asawa and Albert Lanier, 2002 June 21-July 5. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

cloth, and your use of cheap wire can still create art because I believe art can be made out of anything, from milk cartons and wire to paint and hot glue, much like the *Found Objects* that were so common at Black Mountain. Furthermore, I believe that materials can also carry history with them based on their original use and their use in our artwork. Looking at your use of wire specifically, it is normally used as a barrier, to keep people and animals in and out of specific areas. However, in your artwork, the same wire takes on a different meaning. It is now used as something to allow light and air through, giving your sculptures an open, “lighter-than-air” look. Like the image below, allowing light through makes the piece feel as if it is floating, and the shadow also becomes part of the artwork overall.



Ruth Asawa, "Untitled", 1958, Wire Sculpture

In addition to the history of the crafter, and the history of the materials, I think there is also a lot of history involved in the process of making something. I have read about the inspiration for your wire sculptures, and about the local craftspeople who showed you how to make wire baskets. The process of manipulating metal into the new format of 3d sculptures carries history with it. To me, your process is similar to that of crochet. Looking at your work, I draw parallels to weaving and working with thread, creating natural forms that flow with smooth lines and curves. The similarities to textile work do not end there. Early textile work done by women was often not seen as “high” art and instead took on a more domestic/practical role. Unfortunately, the concept that artistic expression done by women is valid took a longer time to gain acceptance, as seen by the lack of much appreciation for your work, and its description as “domestic” or “decorative”.<sup>2</sup> In my experience, working with textiles is often also a repetitive and soothing task, where small stitches work together to create intricate designs and larger patterns. Similarly, your use of the looping wire is rhythmic and formed by repeated action. The larger sculpture takes on a life of its own and uses the small components for structure and pattern. The idea that small motions can work as a whole to bring life to a larger piece is something that never ceases to amaze me, especially when I see it in action. To me, this is also present in your work with community outreach. One example that immediately comes to mind is your work with the “San Fransisco Fountain”, where you worked

2. Zack Hatfield, “Ruth Asawa: Tending the Metal Garden,” *The New York Review of Books*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/09/21/ruth-asawa-tending-the-metal-garden/>.

with children in schools from different parts of San Francisco to develop the carvings on the fountain. Each individual part, originally formed from dough, worked with the others to create a breathtaking depiction of life in San Francisco.



Ruth Asawa, "The San Francisco Fountain", 1970, Bronze

Having learned so much about your life and work, I am inspired by how you continued to push through the blatant racism (which unfortunately continues today in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic), and sexism you faced in order to become a leader and expand the reach of art education in your community and beyond. I am interested in learning about your work with the community to expand art education because I am very involved in outreach myself. However, in contrast to your work with art education, the community outreach I was exposed to was primarily for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). Reflecting on my



experiences through the school system, I realize that my career path was primarily set by what I was exposed to as a child.

As a result of what I focused on while in school, I came into this class thinking that technology was for careers, and art was just a cool hobby – nothing more, nothing less. For most of the people around me, STEM and the humanities were (for the most part) mutually exclusive. However, the idea that someone needs to pick only one aspect and pursue that stands in direct contrast with the way real life works. I believe that the arts and humanities are beneficial topics for everyone to study, especially for people in technology. Studying the arts helps us to understand our own unique human perspectives and can help make our technology more ethical and sustainable in the long run. After taking this class, and learning more about art and its benefit to people, I can now say that I agree with your opinion that art education “makes a person broader”<sup>3</sup> and can help everyone criticize, commemorate, or understand our society in order to create improvements for everyone.

Sincerely,

Roshni Srikanth.

### Media Attributions

- [Ruth Asawa with hanging sculpture](#) © Estate of Ruth Asawa and courtesy David Zwirner

3. Milton Chen, “Ruth Asawa: ‘Art Is for Everybody,’” February 2, 2007, <https://www.edutopia.org/art-everybody#:~:text=%22Through%20the%20arts%2C%20you%20can,the%20abstract%2C%22%20Asawa%20says.&text=Art%20will%20make%20people%20better,It%20makes%20a%20person%20broader.%22>.

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# 16

## ALECE STANCIN ON JOHN CAGE

*Alece Stancin is a third year economics major in the Economics Department at UW. She is interested in researching economic inequality and the economic impacts on individuals from gender, sexuality, and race-based discrimination. She loves to write and has been trying many forms of making during the pandemic, including embroidery, watercolor, and learning to play the guitar.*

*John Cage (1912-1992) was an American composer, musician, and thinker. He taught music theory and performance at different universities, famously at Black Mountain College. He is widely considered one of the most influential composers of the twentieth century for re-imagining what music and composition could be.*

## Letter to the Artist

Dear John Cage,

Almost 75 years since you first visited Black Mountain College<sup>1</sup>, its impact on you and your subsequent impact on the world is

still being studied.

Here I am, proof of that.

When I first saw one of your performances,

[“Water Walk,”](#) I was immediately entranced.

The first noise you

made in the

composition was

through manipulating

the strings of the piano

rather than playing the keys. That is so utterly

unprecedented that I had no idea how to react. When you

started popping crackers, opening and closing the lid of a

pot of boiling water, and scooping water from an actual

bathtub at the front of the stage, I knew this musical

performance would be like nothing I had ever seen

before. As a pianist, I was in awe. I was ready to hear

piano music carefully sculpted and scored. Instead, you

broke every rule of composition.

I know you were thinking about the definition of composition and pushing its boundaries<sup>2</sup>. Once



John Cage among peers at a reception in 1980. Cage is in the middle, looking towards the camera.

1. “Composing Silence: John Cage and the Black Mountain College,” The Museum of Modern Art, last modified January 3, 2014, MoMA | Composing Silence: John Cage and Black Mountain College
2. Joan Retallack, “The Radical Curiosity of John Cage,”

composition is not limited to music, where does it end? As you considered, is writing the act of composing words? Is dance the act of composing movement? Can scooping water out of a bathtub be composed on sheet music? For my “Waiting” project I created a spiraling labyrinth of footsteps to capture the tense, anxious type of waiting to hear if my grandmother is okay after injuring herself. I spent a lot of time on the placement of the footprints after cutting them out because I wanted to ensure that there was enough space to walk through the labyrinth without stepping on the footprint “boundaries.” I think the intersection of composition and visual art is interesting as area you did not explore as much. Perhaps I was composing emotions just as much as I was composing the physical space of the piece. I would love to know what you think about how I actively composed this piece of art.

Contemporary Music Review, April 21, 2016, Full article: The Radical Curiosity of John Cage—Is the word ‘music’ music? (washington.edu)



This is my "Waiting" project. The outer circle of felt footprints are sewn on with red thread, but the inner spiral remains pinned to the backing cloth.

Take, for example, Cecilia Vicuña's *basuritas*. On her website, Vicuña describes her *basuritas* as "objects composed of debris"<sup>3</sup>. She arranged the pieces of trash and debris in a certain way to become a piece of art. Another word for compose is arrange. I think this is a clear example of the definition of composition expanding to include the composition of visual art, not just music. I imagine a painting can be composed, just as a poem or a dance is composed. I love this idea that you had and other artists have continued to expand upon.

When I think about what your expansion of composition did for music, I think about the new opportunities it created. Traditionally, music was

3. Cecilia Vicuña, "Introduction," Accessed March 14, 2021, Introduction — Cecilia Vicuña ([ceciliavicuna.com](http://ceciliavicuna.com))

something that was performed by a trained musician for an audience. The audience could include other trained musicians, but the important thing is that the trained professional was performing and the audience was listening. When you reimagined what music could be—the sound of a tea kettle, a dropped pan, disjointed piano notes—suddenly, the world of music became accessible to anyone. Nobody had to be a trained musician to create music; anyone who could create sound was composing. Music became an equalizer between the performer and the audience, and brought them together rather than dividing them into different planes of ability. How did you come to consider music in terms of sound rather than within the traditional concept of arranging notes played on an instrument? Did you know that it would create a whole new world of music and composition for anybody to participate in? Was that your intention?

Whether you intended it to happen or not, music has now become accessible to anyone who wants to participate, and your influence was part of that change. It reflects a broader change in the 20th century across disciplines of redefining who is an artist and what art is. Because of these movements, anyone who participates in creating can be an artist, rather than only people whose work is displayed in museums or played by orchestras. As a result, the distinction between “high” art and “low” art became muddy, to the point where the two are no longer considered separate. The larger trend of breaking down barriers to art is reflected in your work and has only expanded since your time.

Interestingly, one form of visual art that has always been accessible is sewing. Sewing was almost the

opposite of music and “fine” art, where it has never had barriers, and only recently has been seen as art rather than a hobby or a utilitarian task. The AIDS Quilt and many of the women’s rights movement pieces were done intentionally with the connotation of sewing in mind: comfort, homeliness, women’s work. It is so important to recognize the work that has been done by the women’s rights movement, the AIDS Quilt, Cecilia Vicuña’s installments, and so many other artists in creating a space for sewing in the art world and showing that sewing is a legitimate field of art.

Breaking down barriers to accessing creation of art is what allowed me to create visual art projects for this course. I have no training in visual arts; the last time I made a visual art project for a class was in middle school. If art was still reserved for trained professionals, I would be resigned to the position of viewer rather than maker. Instead, I was able to create both a physical art piece and a digital art piece. The fact that I learned the digital art program during the process of creating my art piece does not make it less “true” or “fine” art; the only distinction is that with more training I could create a more intricate piece. As an economics major, I would not be able to participate in art classes and create art if the traditional definition of an artist had not been dismantled.

I can imagine this is a similar experience for people without musical training. At the Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle, different simulated recording booths are set up to allow the museum visitor to play the drums, the piano, the guitar, and other instruments. A hundred years ago, this might have been strange. After all, most visitors to the museum are not trained musicians. But that is the whole point: nowadays, that doesn’t mean they can’t play



the instruments and enjoy the experience. In the same way that I can create legitimate visual art as an amateur, untrained people can create legitimate music because of your work in redefining music. Although classical music training is not a possibility for everyone, playing music is.

This also makes me realize that so much of music and art is about the process rather than the end result, which is something that I think you focused on in your work: the composition, rather than the performance, is the essence of the work. Otherwise, why would you have spent so much time tinkering with the piano? You even became known for “preparing” the piano before playing it<sup>4</sup>. The concept of experimenting with the elements of the instrument itself in order to create new sounds and new ideas was foreign to me before I started learning about your work. The Dadaists intentionally used their instruments in new and “incorrect” ways as an act of defiance<sup>5</sup>, but you did it to enhance the music, out of love and excitement for the new possibilities you created.

I am usually very end-result focused, and I didn’t realize how much my work would naturally evolve from idea to finished product. I rolled with the punches and allowed ideas to develop and replace one another in your spirit of focusing on the process. For example, in my sewing project, I originally imagined a spiral on a small scale, maybe 3 square feet, that would be hung on a wall. By the end, it had transformed into a full-scale spiral inspired by labyrinths that I can walk through. In fact,

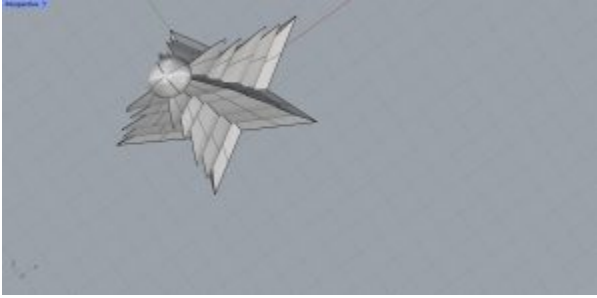
4. John Cage, “How the Piano Came to be Prepared,” 1972, John Cage :: Official Website

5. Afsah Faheem, “Dadaism: Movement of the Rebels,” Taylor’s University, last modified September 21, 2020, Dadaism: Movement of the Rebels - + (kreatifbeats.com)

it isn't actually finished; over the course of making it, I decided to leave it unfinished because the emotion of waiting that I represented is unfinished for me. It felt right to leave it uncompleted, but it was an idea that didn't come to me originally. If I was not open to change, so many of the elements of the piece that I love now would be missing. It was new for me, and sometimes scary not knowing what my finished result would look like or even be.

You began preparing the piano before you worked at Black Mountain College<sup>6</sup>, but I have no doubt that you contributed greatly to that tenet of teachings at the College. Experimentation is something that I have learned to appreciate and try to incorporate into my art throughout the process of creating for this class. With my time capsule piece, my design abilities were somewhat limited by the tools I could use, so I tried to experiment with them as much as possible. Combining tools and using commands in different ways than I had seen in tutorials allowed me to create entirely unique designs that would not be possible if I used the tools individually. It was really freeing. I can only imagine that you felt similarly about how preparing the piano with screws and bolts felt similarly freeing for you, like a whole new world of possible sound suddenly opened.

6. John Cage, "How the Piano Came to be Prepared," 1972, John Cage :: Official Website



My finished time capsule resembled a tree made of layers of stars stacked on top of each other and connected. I liked the idea of using a quickly changing technology to create a slowly changing element of nature, as well as the juxtaposition of the natural and the man-made that it created.

I wish I could learn your opinion about Rhino and 3-D design, and just talk about how far technology has come from your era to now. We have digital keyboards now, which can make the keys sound like all different kinds of instruments. With just the push of a button, a keyboard can sound like an organ, or a full orchestra, or a clarinet, or a round of applause. Would you consider that to be a cheap form of composition, or would you say that electronic experimentation is equally valid to natural experimentation? Musicians also sample sounds in their songs, which I think is tied to the essence of what you were doing. In one of my favorite songs, in the chorus you can hear a train whistle, a bell on a bicycle, a car horn, and a doorbell, among other sounds. They are not meant to be a joke, but are instead genuinely incorporated into the song itself. I think you would enjoy that.

If I was going to revisit my projects knowing what I know now about your work, I think I would try to incorporate more experimentation and new materials into them. Although my projects went through a lot of change, they were still essentially the same at their core as they were when they were just ideas in my head. Really

taking time to brainstorm, play with different ideas and materials, and embrace experimentation would only enhance them more and embrace the style that Black Mountain College embodied. Of course, I was limited by time and by budget, but my work in this class and everything I have learned about Black Mountain College and the Bauhaus has inspired me to potentially keep creating. I really enjoyed the process as well as seeing the final result, and my work was a really positive emotional outlet during these stressful times.

One of the things I admire the most about your work is how it seems like you often had no idea what was going to happen at the end of your experiments when you started them. It was not about the “correct” or perfect result for you; if we decide that every outcome is valid, then there is no such thing as failure, only different end results. We as creators are all end-result focused in a sense, because what we display for others is the finished product. If we could all embrace the idea that there is no failure in making, but only discovery, the opportunities for discovery would become endless, just as you learned when you first prepared the piano. We all still have a lot to learn from you.

In Admiration,  
Alece

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# 17

## MIGUEL SYMONDS ORR ON R. BUCKMINSTER FULLER

*Miguel Symonds Orr is an ecological designer committed to the movement(s) to shift society in more democratic, egalitarian, and ecological directions. They are studying ecological design at the University of Washington through programs in the College of Built Environments and the School of Environmental and Forest Sciences. Their focus is on the Nch'i-Wána Plateau region of Washington State East of the Cascades, which they call home.*

*Buckminster Fuller (1895 – 1983) was an ecological designer*

*and visionary thinker, known for concepts he espoused such as ephemeralization and tensegrity, and projects he designed such as the Dymaxion house and, most famously, the geodesic dome. He taught summer programs at Black Mountain College in 1948 and 1949.*

Preface:

*This letter is written as a message to R. Buckminster Fuller from a fictional group of his followers who have decided to change their course away from some of his guidance.*

Dear Captain R. Buckminster Fuller,

It is with a heavy heart that I inform you that prospects on Spaceship Earth are looking grim, which you were able to sense during your last years aboard<sup>1</sup>. The emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, which contribute to the overall warming of Earth's temperatures, continue unabated<sup>2</sup>. Beautiful, biodiverse places on Earth are pillaged and stripped of their natural beauty to support only the profits of a few in a design mindset that is short-sighted and unsustainable. Plastics, despite the technological benefits they bring, are polluting oceans and waterways and harming more and more wildlife<sup>3</sup>. We seem to be on a spaceship steered by

1. Peter Anker, "Buckminster Fuller as Captain of Spaceship Earth," *Minerva* (London) 45, no. 4 (2007): 433. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/41821426>
2. Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, "Greenhouse Gas Emissions," accessed March 14, 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/greenhouse-gas-emissions>
3. Laura Parker, "The World's Plastic Pollution Crisis Explained," *National Geographic*, June 7, 2019,

a greedy few who are crashing our common prospects against the rocks in pursuit of the dollar. And while your technological inventions have had a great impact, and green technology is expanding, an overall shift to green technology which would slow our disastrous route has not occurred.

An analysis of our present conditions, informed not only by the findings of the sciences but by the philosophical works, structural interrogations, and historical accounts of many with diverse viewpoints, including those whose viewpoints are too often overlooked, especially Indigenous peoples, has led us to make a change in our organization. We will no longer refer to the planet that is our common home as 'Spaceship Earth', and we no longer intend to be the captains of it. Instead, we see the Earth as a beautiful, bountiful, unique, and complex organism which provides for our needs if it is respected and listened to. Although this is a change from your direction, it follows aspects of your thinking, such as your constant pursuit of knowledge of the principles of the universe and application of them.

Although you have seen humanity as on a linear path from uneducated to learned in which we have only recently gained the potential to provide for all humans<sup>4</sup>, many indigenous peoples throughout the world have lived on this planet for generations without despoiling its resources. They often saw the Earth as a relative, not

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/plastic-pollution>

4. Buckminster Fuller, "Spaceship Earth", InfiniteMIT, filmed 1979, <https://infinite.mit.edu/video/buckminster-fuller-spaceship-earth%E2%80%9D-3141979>



simply a collection of resources to be measured and accounted for<sup>5</sup>. Their beliefs helped to keep their society in positive relationship with their local ecology, so we believe we should listen to their viewpoints for the good of our planetary home. In fact, indigenous peoples currently protect eighty percent of biodiversity<sup>6</sup>. While we are certain that the principles of design you researched and applied to create buildings, such as the power of the triangle in structures and the lightness and strength of aluminum, will be important for the future, we aim to balance this perspective with the technological genius inherent in the ecological designs of indigenous peoples.

Furthermore, we wish to distance ourselves from military terminology, since the United States military and militarism the world over is a major contributor to ecological devastation. In fact, the US military is responsible for 59 million tons of CO2 emissions in 2017, over 10 million tons higher than all of Sweden's CO2 emissions<sup>7</sup>. We know that your experience in the military was very formative to you, and we believe that

5. "We Are Indigenous: Sustainability Inherent to Indigenous Political Ecology," UN Academic Impact, September 2nd, 2020, <https://academicimpact.un.org/content/we-are-indigenous-sustainability-inherent-indigenous-political-ecology>
6. Gleb Raygorodetsky, "Indigenous Peoples Defend Earth's Biodiversity-But They're In Danger," National Geographic, November 16, 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/can-indigenous-land-stewardship-protect-biodiversity->
7. Niall McCarthy, "Report: The U.S. Military Emits More CO2 Than Many Industrialized Nations [Infographic]," Forbes, June 13, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2019/06/13/report-the-u-s-military-emits-more-co2-than-many-industrialized-nations-infographic/?sh=582be6e44372>

we need to move beyond militaristic ideas but retain rigorous research and clear organizational structures, positive elements you recognized in the military. Although the military was one of your biggest clients<sup>8</sup>, we no longer wish to support it with our technology. As you said, the military is an instance of “extraordinary technology, beautiful science... reduced as to work to destruction”<sup>9</sup>.

We are continuing with your mission to educate as many people as possible in the sciences and in design, but are adopting a more localized approach. While design experts are vital to the future of our world, there are limitations to our previous model, in which we taught people generalized principles without focusing enough on applying those principles to their local environments. Design experts from afar will never be able to design as well as design experts who are in touch with their local ecologies. However, we will need more than education to actualize the changes we need.

In 1968, you said ‘if humanity succeeds, its success will have been initiated by inventions and not by the debilitating, often lethal biases of politics’<sup>10</sup>. However, many green technologies like those you’ve dreamed of have been or are being created, such as structures printed by machines from the Earth under our feet<sup>11</sup> and plastic-

8. Peter Anker, “Buckminster Fuller as Captain of Spaceship Earth,” 423.

9. “Buckminster Fuller, ‘Spaceship Earth’”, InfiniteMIT, filmed 1979, <https://infinite.mit.edu/video/buckminster-fuller-spaceship-earth%E2%80%9D-3141979>

10. Peter Anker, “Buckminster Fuller as Captain of Spaceship Earth,” 432.

11. “Mud Frontiers”, Rael San Fratello, Copyright 2021, <https://www.rael-sanfratello.com/made/mud-frontiers>

like materials made out of fungi<sup>12</sup>. Solar photovoltaic panels are more efficient than ever<sup>13</sup>, and great strides are being made in designing buildings that gather more energy than they use<sup>14</sup>. The mere existence of these technologies has not led to a shift; instead, because of political motives, our material resources continue to be used in foolish and harmful ways. Your recognition that politics are often subservient to production<sup>15</sup> rings true. In our current systems, politicians are paid by those who control and profit from production, and therefore our production systems are ratified and protected by political systems. This is why ecological technologies have not yet displaced traditional extractive methods.

Therefore, we have decided that we need to change the political system that protects harmful production methods, despite your belief that engaging in politics is futile. We must engage in a politics that puts production and ecological decisions in the hands of all in local communities rather than a privileged few who benefit from ecological destruction. Our ideas about the form of

12. We Don't Have Time, "IKEA Starts Using Biodegradable Mushroom-Based Packaging for Its Products," Medium, April 11, 2018, <https://medium.com/wedonthavetime/ikea-starts-using-biodegradable-mushroom-based-packaging-for-its-products-42d079f98bb1>
13. Peter Killy-Detwiler, "Solar Technology Will Just Keep Getting Better: Here's Why," Forbes, September 26, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/peterdetwiler/2019/09/26/solar-technology-will-just-keep-getting-better-heres-why/?sh=7123f7547c6b>
14. Lucy Wang, "8 Homes That Generate More Energy Than They Consume," Inhabitat, April 7, 2017, <https://inhabitat.com/8-homes-that-generate-more-energy-than-they-consume/>
15. Peter Anker, "Buckminster Fuller as Captain of Spaceship Earth," 433

this politics are much inspired by the work of Murray Bookchin, a contemporary of yours who spoke at the Toward Tomorrow Fair in 1978, an event you also presented at<sup>16</sup>. We believe you were rightly skeptical of politics since electoral politics often empowers small groups of people who work within systems which devastate the earth while meeting the economic needs of only a select few. Bookchin called this kind of politics 'statecraft'<sup>17</sup>; instead, we intend to pursue a politics that will empower all.



Photovoltaic panels installed in 2008.

16. Murray Bookchin, "Utopia, Not Futurism: Why Doing The Impossible Is The Most Rational Thing We Can Do," Uneven Earth, recorded 1978, [http://unevenearth.org/2019/10/bookchin\\_doing\\_the\\_impossible/#easy-footnote-5-3428](http://unevenearth.org/2019/10/bookchin_doing_the_impossible/#easy-footnote-5-3428)
17. Murray Bookchin, "Toward a Communalist Approach," The Anarchist Library, 2006, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-toward-a-communalist-approach>



The Dymaxion House in the Henry Ford Museum in 2009.

We have already mentioned that we are intending to empower designers in local environments, not just a centralized group. We think this is vital for the future of the planet.

Your mass-produced

designs included many genius technological advancements in methods which make production more energy-efficient and less resource-intensive; however, the resources to transport mass-produced goods remains significant. Luckily, makerspaces, locations in which various machines are located in communities for local production, are becoming more prevalent. Advancements in 3D printing technology, in which one can create a design with a computer and actualize it through the use of various machines which turn materials into forms, are making it easier and easier to produce locally. We also recognize that ecological design cannot be centralized like yours often was because the materials and constraints of environments differ. For example, in hot and sunny environments, houses must be designed to protect residents from the sun in hot seasons and to be well-ventilated. However, in cold environments, houses must be designed to protect residents from the cold and capture as much solar energy as possible. Centralized designs like your Dymaxion

house<sup>18</sup> cannot respond to all of these environments despite their many important strides in design.

To democratize design, we intend to educate all who want design skills through makerspaces in every community and free design classes held by our organization. We will all be co-designers of our common home, rather than a small group of designers designing for the rest. However, we recognize the value in designs which are created in one location and adapted to many other locations. A good example is the Via Binarii project by unfold.be, in which a digital design file for a teapot which is used in machines to print three-dimensional objects was sent to different makers around the world. Makers in each location adapted the design to their personal goals, sometimes linking it to design histories in their locations<sup>19</sup>. We will follow a similar pattern, creating designs together and working with others so they function in diverse environments.

18. Luke, Timothy W, "Ephemerization as Environmentalism: Rereading R. Buckminster Fuller's Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth." *Organization & Environment* 23, no. 3 (2010): 360. [https://doi.org/ 10.1177/1086026610381582](https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026610381582)
19. "Via Binarii," Unfold, June 13, 2019, <http://unfold.be/pages/via-binarii.html>



A picture of Artisan's Asylum, a nonprofit community makerspace.

Another important principle you recognized is the ability to recycle or reuse materials indefinitely<sup>20</sup>. Unfortunately, the sheer quantity of materials that have been discarded and are now being created is so massive that extra creativity is needed to find uses for some materials. Our collective aims to focus on reuse and recycling in our designs. One of our design collective members, Miguel Symonds Orr, created a hand-sewn piece primarily from used or repurposed materials representing the local ecology and production of the Nci-Wana plateau region of Central and Eastern Washington State. This design showcases our principles of reuse in its construction and attention to local environments in its theme.

20. Buckminster Fuller, "Spaceship Earth".



The piece incorporates fabric and some multi-media pieces sewn onto the fabric (for example, notes from classes and plastic from a Ziploc bag).

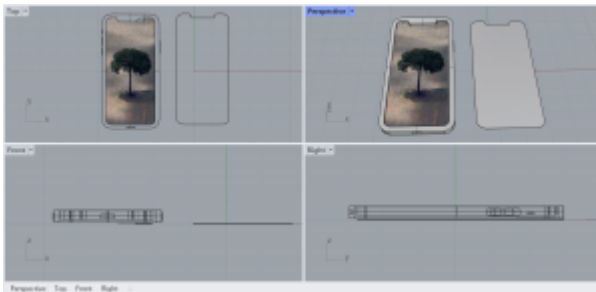
Research into the ecological costs of various materials have led us to move from a dependence on metals to a greater focus on local materials that take less energy to extract and build with, such as wood and even earth itself. While metals have many strengths which you recognized, such as aluminum's high tensile strength<sup>21</sup>, the ecological cost of mining for them and producing with them is too high to justify extensive use. Indigenous peoples in various parts of the world have built comfortable houses that mesh with their local environments from only the materials around them; learning from this is necessary for the future. The principle of ephemeralization that you often spoke of, in which technology is on a route to accomplish more and more with fewer and fewer resources<sup>22</sup>, seems understandable given the last few

21. Buckminster Fuller, "Spaceship Earth".

22. "R. Buckminster Fuller and Systems Theory," University of Missouri-St. Louis, accessed March 14, 2021,



hundred years of industrial society, but in the current political system, that efficiency does not lead to gains for everyone or even less extraction, because economic growth often leads to only more extraction. New high-tech products such as cell phones and computers, which take a heavy ecological toll to produce, are produced every year. Miguel, mentioned earlier, created an art piece to encourage others to think of the connections between constant production and ecological devastation. The design is a representation of an iPhone 11, a new computer technology, created in a 3D modeling program. Within the phone is an image of a lone tree in a deforested area, representing the ecological toll of always producing newer and 'better' products and selling them. We cannot have infinite growth on a finite planet.



The four viewports of Miguel's project, *Within This Future*, in Rhinoceros, a 3D modeling program.

It may seem that we are discarding many of your original ideas. However, the rigorous research which you promoted and engaged in remains central to our work. One aspect of rigorous research, which you supported, is the need to adopt the methods which are proven to work the best, which is why we are making these shifts. We

<http://umsl.edu/~sauterv/analysis/Fall2013Papers/Purcell/bucky.html#3i>

continue to be engaged in research which aims to find the most ecologically efficient methods of production and living and better them. We use our new knowledge to refine the technologies and ideas you developed.

While rigorous scientific research remains central to our mission, we have expanded research to include listening to the perspectives of other peoples and sociological research, since researchers often take things for granted which limits their options. Like we said, one with a limited viewpoint might not imagine or think that the technologies and methods of indigenous peoples might, in some ways, be more efficient than our current technologies. With a greater breadth of people informing our beliefs, we can research more options. Research gives accurate answers, but one must read more than just science to determine which questions to ask.

Your teachings and model of a life dedicated to the betterment of humanity continue to inspire us. Your contribution to ecological design and our common home will never be forgotten. We are writing to you in grim times for the Earth, yes, but we will not stop as long as we have the ability to help people, no matter how small the odds of changing the course of our destructive systems often seem. Your commitment to rigorous research continues to be central to our methods, and we thank you for the ways in which you supported it throughout your life. Although our path has shifted, we will never give up our central mission of betterment for all humanity.

Sincerely,

Ecological Designers of Earth

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# 18

## SOMMER ULLRICH ON JOHANNES ITTEN

*Sommer Ullrich is a student at University of Washington studying design and psychology. She is interested in researching emotion, color, and form. A few art forms she is interested in are textiles, digital art, and motion.*

*Johannes Itten (1888-1967) was a Swiss Expressionist painter and important figure at the Bauhaus in Weimar. He developed color theories that drew on science and emotion, establishing many important concepts used in art and design.*

Dear Mr. Itten,

I chose to write to you because there are similarities

in our artistic process, and my classes feature many of the principles you taught at the Bauhaus. Through my first making project this quarter, I noticed that we share thoughts about the process of releasing emotion through art and experimenting with shape and color. This first project, making pillows that represented my feelings during Covid, was a subjective exploration of color and shape. My second making project was not as personal, as I was focused more on improving a universal problem with a design solution. For this project I made a moving time capsule that encouraged people to take action on climate change. This project did not relate to your work as much as my first, but brought up some questions for me about what your opinion would be on the digital making space. I would love to tell you about these projects and share how they compare and contrast to your work. I also chose to write to you because I am interested in your perspectives on the challenges of balance between the objective principles of design and the more subjective side of artistic style. Lastly, although I admire you as an artistic figure, I would like to challenge some of your choices and ideas.





Ulrich Sommer, Pillows, 2021. Felt and thread



Itten Johannes, Zweiklang, 1964, Oil on canvas.

Self-finding and emotional expression played a large role in creating the pillows for my first making project. The pillows represented feelings related to the Covid pandemic and quarantine. I used colors and shapes to represent feelings, which draws a parallel with your work. After sewing the pillows, I filled them with the things that made me

feel a certain emotion. This part of the process required emotional awareness and vulnerability. You encouraged students to be real by putting themselves into their art, which felt important to me during this process. I had to really think about how I felt and experience uncomfortable emotions, which can be hard to do during a class project that people will be viewing. You once said, “The kingdom of colors has within it multidimensional

possibilities only partly to be reduced to simple order. Each individual color is a universe in itself.”<sup>1</sup> You seem to be saying that colors contain more than just the responsibility of the system they are assigned to. Colors can hold completely different meanings, depending on the person. Through my design courses, I have been taught an order that can be followed but I still feel like there is more to color. There is something that can not be reduced to a systematic approach. I used this perspective when I was making the pillows, using purely what I felt the color to represent.

The colors I chose to represent the feelings were:

Blue: sadness

Red: anger

Yellow: happiness

White: hope

Pink: anxiety

I differed the shape for each feeling, into a form that made sense for each one. This would interest you and your colleague Kandinsky because you both worked with interactions between shape and color. You liked to paint geometric abstractions exemplifying your research into color. Through these geometric abstractions you played with dynamic contrasts of color, as well as rhythms between dark and light. Most of your works consisted of primary shapes and colors, which became a consistent theme of the Bauhaus. A lot of your works were inspired by your colleague Kandinsky. Kandinsky had a synesthetic relationship with color, associating colors with musical notes. He also saw lots of associations

1. “Color.” The Getty Research Institute. Accessed 2021-02-20.  
[https://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions\\_events/exhibitions/bauhaus/new\\_artist/form\\_color/color/](https://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/exhibitions/bauhaus/new_artist/form_color/color/)

between color and form. For example, he saw squares as being red, triangles as yellow, and circles as blue. You both explored shapes and color, finding what meaning they could convey through their properties. Your paintings were very exciting to see because they connected to my project, but through a different medium. One painting I particularly enjoyed was, *Zweiklang*, which you painted in 1964. This one stood out to me because it mixes warm and cool colors, as well as circles and squares. Through *Zweiklang*, you also experimented with the Gestalt principle of closure by only including parts of the circles, which makes it interesting to look at. The result is a radiant composition that reminds me of the end of a sunset. Painting is a very different making process than sewing, and it made me curious about whether painting my feelings during Covid would achieve a different effect. I think you would agree that different mediums achieve different effects because you encouraged students to find a medium that was best for their personal style in your Bauhaus course. I read that one of your goals was to, “open the world of the objective to students.”<sup>2</sup> and to intermingle objective and subjective form and color problems. Although I did consider how the colors would look together objectively in my project, I let my own personal perspective lead the way when choosing shape and color. It would have been interesting to try to intermingle more objective rules into this project. I think you would have critiqued my shapes because some were more curvilinear rather than the clean cut geometrical shapes that the Bauhaus used. You might have used geometric shapes but only changed the

2. Siebenbrodt, Michael. *Bauhaus 1919-1933: Weimer, Dessau, Berlin*. New York: Parkstone International, 2009-10-01.

color or texture to express the emotion. Although I believe there would have been some differences between our design, I think you would have enjoyed my process because it involved a lot of color choices, individual artistic growth, and connection between the brain and the hand.

I appreciate your interest in connecting the brain to art, because I am a design and psychology major. I enjoy finding ways that these fields relate, one way being the Gestalt principles of design. The Gestalt principles use the way humans perceive to make design more visually captivating. Studying human perception and also studying design has been interesting for me because I have realized that design involves a lot of rationale and systematic thinking, rather than just being artistic. Even though design is different than art in this way, I have also found that connecting my work to the brain in a more emotional way gives it a personal edge that makes it more compelling. Connecting to my work in this way also makes me feel more invested in it. I like the idea of depicting emotions visually, like in my first project. It seems like you enjoyed connecting art to mental activity, through things like breathing exercises and meditation. You said, "He who wants to become a master of color must see, feel, and experience each individual color in its many endless combinations with all other colors. Colors must have a mystical capacity for spiritual expression, without being tied to objects."<sup>3</sup> This quote stood out to me because it made me think about color differently, more as an experience than as a tool. I want to carry this

3. Archino, Sarah. "Johannes Itten Artist Overview and Analysis." TheArtStory.org, published 2017-01-25.  
<https://www.theartstory.org/artist/itten-johannes/>

idea into my projects to come because I think that would make my color choices more important and intentional. I appreciate this outlook on mastering color because I think mindfulness and intentional awareness are essential when creating. It is easy to be passive and just follow trends, so I think it is a good reminder to be deeply invested in your work.

One challenge I have as a design student is finding the balance between design rules and my own artistic style and personality. Sometimes I get very personally invested in a piece and do not pay enough attention to the design principles that could help it be more clean and clearly convey a message. This is a problem I thought you would be interested in and could possibly relate to, because you worked in the design world but experimented a lot artistically. You taught a lot of principles about color and form, but also wanted students to make their work their own. It seemed like you were able to achieve this balance of working with design rules and solutions while also pushing the boundaries of your own personal artistic style. As I noted before, intermingling the objective and subjective was one of your goals. One thing that I think showcased these themes within your design thinking was your theorizing and development of the color wheel.



Itten Johannes, Color Star, 1921

To further develop the color wheel you made a star shaped diagram that explained the seven categories of color, hue, light-dark, cold-warm, complementary, analogous, saturation, and extension. This used objective knowledge to make concepts about color easier to understand. A piece that shows your artistic style is Space Composition II. This

piece uses design principles of color and form, but this time mixed that with personal style, to achieve a futuristic and eerie effect. I admire how you balance your personal artistic methods with design principles, and that inspires me to try that more in my work.



Itten Johannes, "Space Composition II", 1944, Oil on canvas



Ullrich Sommer, "Tipping point", 2021, Rhino

My second making project was less personal and focused on a design answer to the large problem of climate change. We were assigned the task of making a time capsule that represented our current times and was relevant to future society. To do this we used Rhino, a 3D modeling platform.

I made a vase-like structure that would tip back and forth to remind viewers of the "tipping point" of climate change. The capsule would include pictures of animals, environmental features, and places we might lose as well as physical items such as coffee, chocolate, and sand (to represent shoreline loss). If I could re-do this project I would have made its appearance more complex, but it was interesting to experiment with speculative design

and help improve a problem that I was passionate about. Even though the vase was simple, its message was effective. The most challenging part of this assignment was using the software needed to build the time capsule, Rhino. It was very different making something digitally because it was harder for me to understand how the object was moving through space. It also held less options for texture. Feeling the pillows was a large aspect of my first making project and the lack of texture for something that was 3D made it feel less personal. This made me think of your sculpture lessons with students and how you really emphasized texture. It would be interesting to hear about how you would change your lessons if they were online or through a program such as Rhino. How do you make the digital space a personal atmosphere for creating things like sculptures and 3D models? I think as our society evolves we might find answers to this question, such as finding a way to feel texture through screens. Although it was challenging learning a new program, I learned a lot about making a 3D model and I want to experiment with that in the future. I hold a great appreciation for both the physical and digital making space, because I think they can achieve different goals.

For the last part of my letter I would like to challenge you on your belief systems. You experimented with mindfulness and breathing exercises and were involved with the Mazdaznan cult. You experimented with Mazdaznan while at the Stuttgart Academy of Art and then used these teachings at the Viennese school of art and the Bauhaus. Reading about Mazdaznan, a fire cult, was surprising to me given your intellectual background. The word “cult” was a little off putting, but it was



interesting to read about it and see how it inspired your artistic practice. The goals of the cult actually connect to some of my own personal values, which I was not expecting! Followers of the cult maintained vegetarian diets, and I also do not eat meat. A big part of the cult was conscious breathing exercises. I try to do a lot of mindfulness exercises, which is pretty similar. That said, I can not very well understand your choice to be involved in a cult, because I am not religious. This cult in particular also had very questionable values. I would like to challenge your involvement of Mazdaznan in your teaching, because in my opinion, teaching should not involve the teacher's personal religion. This method was problematic not just because it was involving your students in a religious practice, but also because Mazdaznan is well known to be a racist ideological system. Your choice to associate with and spread a racist belief system could have a large impact on your students. Did you ever consider the negative impact your Mazdaznan teachings could have on the Bauhaus? Would you ever consider detaching from Mazdaznan and instead focus on mindfulness teachings? Perhaps there are positive teachings you could isolate from Mazdaznan. You used a lot of these positive teachings in your classes by having students form mind-body connections with physical exercises, connecting to their art mentally and physically. I also understand that your intention was to stabilize the Bauhaus through life-reform practices. I really appreciate this aspect of Mazdaznan and can see why you included it in your teaching practice, but I would hope that looking back you would see the harmful practices you were spreading.

It was so interesting to learn about you this quarter,

and to consider the connections and differences between us. Reading about your exploration of color was very inspiring and made me realize there is so much more I could be doing to experiment with it. I am very curious about what you would think of digital processes and whether you would be able to find the same level of interaction as you did with the physical making process. After researching you and completing my two making projects this quarter, I am much more interested in the history of color and how making processes have evolved over time. Looking at your teaching lessons and work made me also want to look further into balancing objectivity and subjectivity.

Sincerely,

Sommer Ullrich

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# 19

## KRISTINA YANG ON ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

*Kristina Yang is a Junior at the University of Washington majoring in International Studies. Through this major, she is specializing in International Political Economy and International Communications. She is a part of the Interdisciplinary Honors Program at the UW and has found the Arts & Humanities curriculum within Honors to be a great outlet to explore her creativity.*

*Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) was an American painter and graphic artist whose work served as pivotal pieces that played essential roles in the development of postmodern art. He attended The Black Mountain College in 1948, and is most well known for his Combines that blurred the distinctions between painting and sculpture and his silkscreen paintings.*

Letter #1: Robert's Lens on the World

"When you walk down the street, what you see are the things that you have in my art. If you feel like they're dirty and not worth seeing,' he said, 'how miserable are you when you walk down the street?" (Clark 6)

-Robert Rauschenberg

Dear Robert,

I feel that we see the world in a similar way.

One time, you had told somebody... a person who was sort of shaming you for painting things that were like the streets of New York. They were arguing, saying, "We have so many beautiful things here. You just put all the dirty things, the broken things, into your art. We have beautiful things. Why don't you put that in there?" And so you told him, "When you walk down the street, what you see are the things that you have in my art. If you feel like they're dirty and not worth seeing, how miserable are you when you walk down the street? It's not like you're walking in Central Park. You're walking down the street. You have to learn to appreciate what you see."

I have found myself drawn to your work that embraces the imperfect. I remember the first time I opened my eyes and started looking at things like that, "ugly" things like that in a different light. It was during high school in an Intro to Photography class. I was with a friend, helping her shoot for our upcoming project. We were at the beach and her subject was climbing some sharp, jagged rocks along the shore. It was a beautiful scenery, but there was something missing... It seemed almost too picture perfect in my mind. It was only until the subject had fallen and endured some minor scratches when my friend started getting really into her shots. When I saw the final images, I found myself drawn to the imperfect pictures depicting

his injuries and the leftover sand stuck to his shoulder from the fall. It was very real, raw, and visceral and I liked that. I've included one of my favorite images from the shoot below.



Trinity Ace Gardner, *Bloody Eye*, Film, 2018

Just as this moment had taught me to see differently, your own work seems to teach people to see the world in a different light as well. I had read an interview of your sister's explaining how you viewed the world. She explained that "We'd go photographing a lot of times when he'd come home, we'd ride and go photographing. And he

[Robert] wasn't interested in the oak trees with the dripping moss. He would rather see the broken light post with the old bicycle leaning against it or something (Clark 6). To me, your work is intriguing, since it captures daily life in a way that highlights the "unremarkable" (like an old bicycle) but still maintains the reality and authenticity of the scene. Your time at The Black Mountain College developed your interest in integrating daily life into art, and this theme continued throughout the rest of your career (Rauschenberg Foundation). In future letters, I hope to explore your early, experimental years and how those years led to your later style of silk-screen paintings rooted in mass media; Yet within it all,

your artwork somehow consistently evokes raw and visceral feelings.

Letter #2: More Than Just Self-Expression

“I suppose, like most people, I’d always thought of art as a form of self-expression. And Bob had no interest in expressing himself in art. In fact, he said, ‘I think art should be a lot more interesting than that, than just my personality.’” (Clark 12).

– Calvin Tomkins

Dear Robert,

I, like your colleague Calvin Tomkins, have always felt that art is a form of self-expression. You, however, seemed to possess this clear perspective that art is more than just self-expression, and you’ve thought this way from very early on, even as a student at The Black Mountain College. One of your earliest photographs, *Quiet House*, was taken at Black Mountain College in 1949.

This photograph was taken in The Quiet House, a small stone building on campus that was revered as a space for meditation and ceremonial use (SF MOMA). This photo is more than just self-expression; It is a representation of a beloved space that highlights the sacred energy and influence



Robert Rauschenberg, *Quiet House* – Black Mountain, 1949 © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

this space had on people during this time. The composition of the photo emphasizes the arrangement of lines, light, and darkness on an otherwise mundane scene of two wooden chairs in the corner of a room. Because of your careful composition of this photo, the everyday objects possess a sort of drama about them that signals a sense of significance. As seen throughout your future art pieces, you continued this theme of examining the tension between the characteristics of an actual object versus its photographic representation (SF MOMA). Something interesting to note is that this photo reappears in your later Combines and silkscreen works.

Another one of your early, experimental works developed at Black Mountain College was your series of photograms, commonly known as the *Blueprints*. Using photosensitive paper, you were able to create images without a camera by exposing the paper to light and using objects (like human subjects and household objects) to make impressions.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled*, monoprint:  
exposed blueprint paper, 1950 © 2019 Robert  
Rauschenberg Foundation.



Robert Rauschenberg, Sue, monoprint: exposed blueprint paper, 1949 © 2019 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.



Robert Rauschenberg, Light Borne in Darkness, monoprint: exposed blueprint paper, 1951 © 2019 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

What is most fascinating to me is the one-to-one scale of the bodies and objects silhouetted against the blue backgrounds. The proportional size of the objects gives the images an eerie feeling due to their close similarities

to reality. Whether it be the contorting human figures or twisted series of hands, the line between reality and illusion is blurred— garnering a sense of wary interest. These photograms are certainly more than just self-



expression. These camera-less photographs seem to be a statement against past artistic movements that are characterized by non-objective imagery, like Abstract Expressionism. Furthermore, these blueprints signal the beginning of your innovative use of everyday objects and mixed media which would later characterize your most known Combines and silkscreen works.

When making my *Waiting* midterm project, I found myself using recognizable images, similar to the imagery in your photograms. For this project, we were instructed to create a piece using textiles that represented our own experience with waiting. I embroidered images from pop culture onto a white sweatsuit to directly represent what I have done to pass time while waiting for our current pandemic to pass. I chose to use imagery from pop culture, because I wanted people to immediately recognize what they were looking at. Some of the images I included were characters from current TV shows like Rick & Morty and Bart Simpson from *The Simpsons*. I also added images from contemporary album covers like the pink guitar from Machine Gun Kelly's *Tickets to My Downfall* and the crying lady from a Saint Motel album cover.

Kristina Yang, *Waiting*, Textile Embroidery, 2021Kristina Yang, *Waiting*, Textile Embroidery, 2021

Just as the hands clutching twigs and human figures are easily discernible in your photograms, so are the images embroidered onto this sweatshirt. I like the idea of not having to guess about what you are looking at. Perhaps this stems from my constant need to be in the know and in control of my daily life. A major difference between my *Waiting* piece and your *Blueprints*, however, is the fact that *Waiting* is entirely a piece of self-expression. The embroidery on the sweatshirt stems completely from my personal experience during our current global pandemic. The images from pop culture are representations of how I've passed the extra time on my hands during quarantine. The embroidered

text is a combination of my thoughts and how I have labeled this pandemic.

I wonder if, in your mind, one type of art is objectively “better” than the other. When art is more than just self-expression, is there more value to it compared to a purely self-expressive piece? Part of me wants to say that self-expression pieces are more shallow than non-self-expression pieces; But this opinion may just stem from the fact that I look up to your work and see myself as a beginner artist. I hope one day that I can step outside of my own experiences and create art that is more than just self-expression. Perhaps something that is a rejection of past art movements, like your *Blueprint* photographs.

### Letter #3: Revolutionary Experimentation

“He worked in a kind of effortless way. There was no stress. It seemed like he didn’t do much stopping and thinking and stepping back to look. He would just put down a screen and squeegee the color over it. Then pick it up and look at it for a minute or so. Then he’d take another screen, not waiting for the first one to dry (Clark 28).

– Calvin Tomkins

Dear Robert,

*Quiet House* and *Blueprints* demonstrate your early fascination with photography while attending Black Mountain College. I’ve heard that your work with photography made you unsure of whether to pursue painting or photography as a career; But alas, you were able to combine both methods into your future career through your well-known combines and silkscreen paintings. Nonetheless, it seems that your time at Black Mountain College was a time of experimentation for you.

Clearly, you experimented with different mediums for your artwork, but as described by your colleague Calvin Tomkins, your actual process of making was quite experimental as well.

Some of your most well-known experimental artworks are your Combines, a term coined by yourself. These pieces merged painting and sculpture to create an entirely new artistic category. The orientation of your Combines challenged the traditional concept of the two-dimensional picture plane, giving viewers a window into another reality.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram*, Combine: oil, watercolor, pencil, crayon, paper, fabric, photographs, printed reproductions, miniature blueprint, newspaper, metal, glass, dried grass, 1955-59 © 2019 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Odalisk*, Combine: oil, watercolor, pencil, crayon, paper, fabric, photographs, printed reproductions, miniature blueprint, newspaper, metal, glass, dried grass, and steel wool with pillow, wood post, electric lights, and rooster on wood structure mounted on four casters, 1955-58 © 2019 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

You have stated that a Combine is like a tabletop or bulletin board—a sort of “receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered” (54). This revolutionary description reminded me of the CAD software I used to make my *Time Capsule* project.

This computer software is meant for the creation of 3-D printable objects; And just how you described your Combines, Rhino is a “receptor” software “on which data is entered.” For this

assignment, we were instructed to create a time capsule that would represent something about our current times for a future society to find. My *Time Capsule* project used Rhino to create a 12-inch by 12-inch dice. I chose dice, because the unpredictable game that dice are used for reminded me of the unpredictable nature of this pandemic that I am currently living in. This time capsule would hold a deck of cards, scattered within the box as a further metaphor for the uncertain, messy times we are living in. Furthermore, the cards added a personal touch,

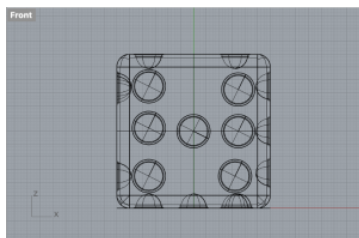
since I have spent numerous hours playing cards with family and friends during quarantine.

### Perspective



Kristina Yang, *Time Capsule*, Rhino, 2021

I find it quite incredible that what you envisioned for your Combines, as a Rhino-like “receptor surface,” was not yet invented while you created this concept. What I prefer about your Combines



Kristina Yang, *Time Capsule*, Rhino, 2021

over Rhino is the higher degree of freedom that comes with hands on making. With Rhino, the creation of objects all boils down to mathematics; And if the math doesn't perfectly add up, the object will not hold up or be structurally sound once 3-D printed. I found these specific parameters to be a bit stifling, creatively speaking. What I appreciate about your Combines is the

room for creativity and mistakes. While I shouldn't identify your brushstrokes and figure placement as "mistakes," there is a sense of intentional carelessness to the elements of your Combines that creates interest. Furthermore, the mixed media nature of your Combines allows for the experimentation with textures that makes the pieces feel more real and raw. With 3-D printing, it would be extremely difficult to mimic the hair like texture of the goat or the distressed nature of the wood pictured in *Monogram*.

Another well-known example of your experimental artwork is your silkscreen paintings made between 1962 and 1964. These pieces were revolutionary for their time, because of the commercial means of reproduction that silkscreen printing was associated with. These mechanically produced screens allowed you to transcribe your own photographs and images taken from the media onto a larger scale. This method of production also led the public to identify you with the Pop Art movement.

*Retroactive I* is a silkscreen painting that consists of numerous images and scenes taken from magazines and television. Each image was chosen with a specific meaning in mind. For example, the picture of John F. Kennedy was added to reflect a sense of encouraging promise for America's future. The American astronaut was added to symbolize the wealth and confidence of the US during the 1960s.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Retroactive I*, Silkscreen Painting, 1963 © 2019 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

I find close similarities between your silkscreen paintings and my own *Waiting* project. Both of our uses of mass media imagery (taken from television or album covers) gives the viewer a clear idea of the events that are happening in the world during that time period. While it originally was not my intention for *Waiting* to be a piece that memorializes our current pandemic, peer feedback and your own silkscreen paintings have revealed that my piece has the potential to symbolize an entire time period. You have explained that “I don’t want a picture to look like something it isn’t. I want it to look like something it is. And I think a picture is more like the real world when it’s made out of the real world” (63). And I would agree. There is a great amount of power that comes with real-world imagery within art.



There is, however, a key difference between our processes of making. As mentioned earlier by you colleague Calvin Tomkins, you worked in “a kind of effortless way. There was no stress” you wouldn’t “do much stopping or thinking and stepping back to look” (Clark 28). It seems that your process of making centers around experimentation and in-the-moment impulses. I, on the other hand, am often constrained by my constant attention to details; And it shows in the tight stitching and precise lined nature of my embroidery on *Waiting*. For me, when looking at art, I am most drawn to your process of making, the more casual and free methods of design that make a piece feel more visceral and raw; But when I’m tasked to create my own art, my perfectionist mentality prevents me from creating that kind of art.

To conclude our conversation, I will continue with this thought: Something about your process of making and the final outcome of your art is captivating to me. Perhaps this is because of we both appreciate the imperfect within everyday life. While I feel most connected to art like yours that displays reality and intentional mistakes, my own work does not achieve the same goal. In my opinion, this stems from my meticulous, rather “Bauhaus-like” process of making. In contrast, your work and career in general, centers around experimentation. I assume this was taught to you during your time at Black Mountain College. I hope, one day, my own art can be less constrained by my attention to detail as I open my mind to the occurrences of mistakes. Furthermore, learning about your experimentation has shown me that I do not need to go into the process of making knowing everything. Hopefully, I can begin embracing the mindset of creating moment by moment,

reacting to spur-of-the-moment impulses as I create my art.

Best,

Kristina Yang

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- dice-front
- retro

# 20

## ISOBEL WILLIAMSON ON WASSILY KANDINSKY

*Isobel Williamson is a junior at the University of Washington studying International Studies on the Human Rights track with a minor in French. Her favorite artistic media to work with are watercolor and acrylic paints. After college, she plans on entering the field of human rights diplomacy. Outside of school, she enjoys long walks with friends, theater, podcasting, and travel.*

*Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was a Russian abstract painter. He taught at the Bauhaus starting in 1922 and served as deputy director from 1923-33. Kandinsky became a pioneer*

*of abstract art and expressionism and is well known for his art theories surrounding color, shape, and emotion.*



Anonymous. Wassily Kandinsky. c 1913. Photography. Rückblicke. Berlin: Sturm Verlag.

March 15, 2021

Dear Wassily Kandinsky,

My name is Isobel Williamson, and I'm a junior at the University of Washington studying International Studies and an avid fan of painting and art history. For my Honors "The Politics and Practice of Making: Art as a Tool for Creating Change" course this winter, I'm writing this letter to discuss the relationship between the purpose

of making art for the creator as it relates to symbolism, the sensory experience, and social and political context. I also want to explore how technological progress has played into each of these themes and how your teachings are relevant in the modern day. I wanted to address you specifically because, after viewing some of your works in the Centre Pompidou on a trip several years ago, I was immediately struck by your use of color, shape, and composition, and how your paintings are so evocative of music and sound. Your art was incredibly resonant with me. I thought it would be only fitting that I compare and contrast our perspectives on the aforementioned themes and analyze your theories and teachings through the lens of my own lived experiences and modern-day context.

Regarding the purpose of art for the creator as it relates to symbolism and the sensory experience, one of the most prominent theories you developed is that art should be original and highlight the artist's inner truth. You write, "That is beautiful which is produced by the inner need, which springs from the soul."<sup>1</sup> I have interpreted your idea of "original" to mean "unlike anything else that has been created before because it is so authentic and personal to its creator." You firmly argue that the most compelling works of art are the ones that are most personal. You also stated that artists should be prepared for others to misunderstand their work, and that abstract shapes are the most effective way to convey an artist's inner truth. For example, many of your paintings, such as *Composition 8*, demonstrate your inner sensory world and your experience with synesthesia.<sup>2</sup>

1. Kandinsky, Wassily, 1866-1944. *Concerning The Spiritual in Art*. London :Tate, 2006.
2. Berry, Kenneth. "The Paradox of Kandinsky's Abstract



Vasily Kandinsky. July 1923. *Composition 8*. Painting. Place: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection.

I believe that your teaching that the purpose of making art is to express inner truths is relevant today because, in the 21st century, we are constantly taking in huge amounts of information through social media, news, and other sources. Many sources we view are curated by algorithms that show us the content we are most likely to interact with. This means that much information we receive now does not challenge our beliefs and reinforces our preconceived notions. I believe that, from a modern-day perspective, we can learn from your idea that art should display the creator's own truth, even though it will be more difficult for the audience to understand. I think that your teachings are especially important in the modern day because the act of slowing down to examine

Representation." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 1 (2005): 99-104.

art and other content that is not designed to be extremely easily interpreted by its audience can be a powerful way of stretching our thinking and expanding our worldview. This is significant in broader context because the media we consume today can create an echo chamber around us and reinforce our own biases if we do not actively seek out information to challenge them. Additionally, I personally felt as though many of my classmates' computer-aided design and textile projects that were symbolic, abstract, or metaphorical allowed me to gain great insight into their perspectives with some context. A major intention of yours was that more details and meanings in your paintings would be revealed to the audience as they expand their understanding of and connection to your work.<sup>3</sup> I think that your theories serve as a reminder to challenge ourselves to pause and conduct critical analysis of the content and media we view, rather than taking in everything at face value.

In contrast to your theories about art's function for the maker and abstraction as the most effective means of conveying this purpose, I used concrete and recognizable symbols and images to make sure that an audience with little context would be able to understand the messages I wanted to convey through my making projects. As shown in the image below, the main component of my "Waiting" project was a mask stitched together from many quilt squares, which I embroidered with designs that clearly represent my experience waiting for quarantine to end: a house captioned with the words "CABIN FEVER," a Zoom logo, and other distinct symbols. After conducting more research into your beliefs around the purpose of

3. Henry, Michel. *Seeing the Invisible : On Kandinsky*. London: Continuum, 2009.



making art, I do agree with you that, the more abstract or symbolic I were to have worked, the more personal to me the project could have been, but the more open to misinterpretation my work would have been without context. While I did find that this project helped me convey my frustrations, anxieties, and upset, and a tiny bit of hope for the future, after reflecting more on your teachings I also believe that the process of making could have been perhaps more introspective for me if I were to have used more abstract or symbolic forms. Still, I believe that, given my intentions for this project: to be able to look back on it in many years and instantly be reminded of my experience during quarantine, my choice to work in more concrete symbols will jog my memory of these truths easier than abstract images.



Isobel Williamson. Quilted Mask. 2020. Photography.

Something I found interesting is how differently we used

art to respond to social and political phenomena that evoke themes of waiting and dread. For my time capsule project, I used computer-aided design software to display a collective truth, rather than an individual truth, around environmental deterioration due to mass production and the dread surrounding an impending ecological crisis. The clear symbols I included, especially the shape of the coffee cup and the logo, were designed to be easily interpreted as a call to action and creating more sustainable methods of production. Your final period of artwork, entitled the "Great Synthesis," which incorporated concepts you developed in your Munich and Bauhaus periods, was informed substantially by your experiences of living through the Great Depression, the Russian Revolution, both World Wars, the Bauhaus being shut down and your work confiscated by the Nazis

<sup>4</sup> A theme throughout these paintings, especially your first ten compositions, is waiting for an apocalypse.<sup>5</sup> You created abstracted symbols for various Biblical characters and themes related to the feeling of impending doom in these compositions through color, shape, and paint techniques.<sup>6</sup> I believe that your individual artistic interpretations of this impending doom can be just as political as expressions of a collective experience. I believe that any personal art can reverberate politically in an impactful way, whether it tells of a collective or an individual truth. And I believe that abstract art is also important in a political and social context because the

4. Lindsay, Kenneth C. *The Art Bulletin* 64, no. 4 (1982): 678-80. Accessed March 16, 2021. doi:10.2307/3050290.

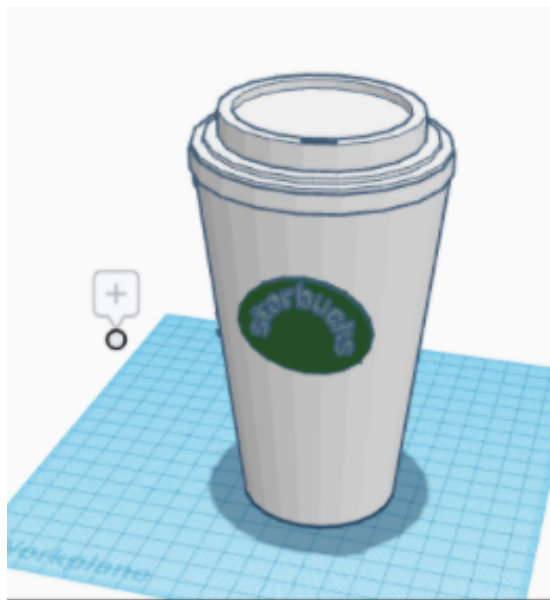
5. Najda, Aleksander. "Apocalypse According to Vasily Kandinsky." PhD diss., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2014. Najda, A., 2014.

6. Najda 2014

work the audience takes to analyze and interpret abstract art can mean that the overall meanings of an abstract piece stick with a viewer for a long time.



Kandinsky, Wassily, 1939. Composition X. Oil on canvas.



Isobel Williamson. Starbucks Cup Time Capsule. 3D Rendering Screenshot.

Next, I'd like to elaborate on the sensory experience of making and creating art and how this relates to technological progress. You use your art as a means of reconnecting with your own sensory world and displaying your experiences with synesthesia. In my "Waiting" project, I worked with sewing and other textiles and noted how time-consuming and detail oriented this process was. This project also very much forced me to reflect on my own bodily, temporal, and sensory experience of waiting. Because most of my life is now entirely online, and my perspective is so often literally limited to a computer screen, I found my waiting project very refreshing, as it is the first project I've done for school in a full year that has been more tactile, rather than entirely on the computer. This relates back to my earlier points about how many of your teachings can

inspire a modern-day audience to slow down, process the world in more detail, and work to understand their own lived experiences and truths.

Would you have found technology such as computer-aided design programs, which allow exactness in terms of selecting shapes and colors, to support your teachings and your theories about the purpose of creating art? Or would you have considered these technologies a less authentic means of expression? From my own analysis, I believe that you may have considered these tools to be extremely helpful in the sense of creating and analyzing color theory and how colors relate to emotional expression, as many of your theories which involved examining the colors of lines and angles, required a great deal of precision.<sup>7</sup> Your "Several Circles" painting, with its exact shapes and very deliberate colors and composition, is an example of this attention to detail.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the process of learning how to use the CAD controls was relatively difficult for me, and I felt as though I did have a bit less influence over the final outcome than if I had done a drawing by hand. I also felt cut off from the tactile experience of making art during my time capsule project in comparison to my "Waiting" project. Ultimately, however, I believe that you would be enthusiastic about the incorporation of computer software into artistry if it helps artists create even more novel designs and express their inner truths in a way that

7. Brooks, Deanna. "It Could Have Been Great: An Examination of Kandinsky's Bauhaus Paintings and the Great Synthesis of the Arts." (2016).

8. Dabrowski, Magdalena. "Kandinsky Compositions: The Music of the Spheres." MoMA, no. 19 (1995): 10-13. Accessed March 15, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4381285>.

is difficult to do otherwise. Furthermore, technology, especially platforms such as YouTube, has democratized arts education and allowed more people to share their work. By this metric, has technology allowed for a higher number of who you call “enlightened artists,” or artists who create the original and truthful works you emphasize?<sup>9</sup>



Vasily Kandinsky. January-February 1926. Several Circles. Painting. Place: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection.

Another quote of yours from Concerning the Spiritual in

9. Kandinsky, Wassily, 1866-1944. Concerning The Spiritual in Art. London :Tate, 2006.

Art that relates to the purpose of making art, symbolism, and the sensory experience that I found very interesting is,

“A painter, who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today, achieves this end. He naturally seeks to apply the methods of music to his own art. And from this results that modern desire for rhythm in painting, for mathematical, abstract construction, for repeated notes of colour, for setting colour in motion.”<sup>10</sup>

I think this quote is worthy of mention because, in relation to technology, I wonder how having access to more video editing software would have influenced your art and legacy in combining the visual and the auditory sensory experiences. Google Arts and Culture has a feature called “Play a Kandinsky,” which allows audiences to hear the sounds associated with the shapes you painted. Would you use video editing software to express your synesthetic experience in addition to or in lieu of painting if you had access to it? Or do you think that this would have conveyed too much information to the reader and made it less worthy of closer examination? I believe that you may have thought that this software would provide too much immediate information to the viewer and given them less room to interpret your work for themselves.

One noteworthy thing I observed when using TinkerCAD is how the default colors for several shapes are very similar to the colors you theorized are associated

10. Kandinsky, Wassily, 1866-1944. *Concerning The Spiritual in Art*. London :Tate, 2006.

with these shapes. I disagree with the aspect of your theory that the emotions that colors and shapes evoke are universal because different cultures have such different lexicons for colors and emotions. I think, however, that example this serves to demonstrate your legacy living on in technological programs built long after you were alive.



Isobel Williamson. 2021. Screenshot, Tinkercad.

Wassily Kandinsky. "Three Primary Colors."

I'm left with a few questions for you, that have been difficult for me to find clear answers to in my own research: how did the amount of context you intended to give the audience of any specific pieces influence your desire to make the imagery more or less abstract? Finally, an overarching question I have touched on throughout this letter is, to what extent do you think that the 21st century technology I described impedes or amplifies our ability to express our truths?

In conclusion, as someone who also does have a few forms of synesthesia, including colored hearing, your art and expressions of your reality were easy for me to build



a personal connection with. For me, the only way to truly express what my sensory experience is like to other people is through art, most often drawings and paintings, as verbal descriptions don't quite do it justice, and I'm not yet talented enough at video editing. Learning that my own sensory perceptions are very different from most people's was initially (and still sometimes is) jarring and surprising for me, but looking at your work reminds me of the importance of working to truly appreciate my way of viewing the world. I've most definitely felt self-conscious about this aspect of my identity and believed it more of a distraction and hindrance. Seeing you turn your synesthesia into art that is highly appreciated many years after you've lived has definitely served to validate my own experiences and help me work to accept and celebrate them as well.

For that, I would like to immensely thank you for your work. While I don't agree with the specifics of all of your theories, your teachings can serve as valuable reminders to reconnect with our sensory systems during the coronavirus pandemic, as well as to make sure to take the effort to understand perspectives and media that are not our own.

Sincerely,

Isobel Williamson

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