

# Aesthetica

## A Reaction to Globalised Production

### Making Is Thinking

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15 INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS EXHIBIT IN ROTTERDAM, IN A GROUND-BREAKING EXHIBITION THAT  
DECIPHERS NEW MEANING WITHIN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MAKING AND THINKING.

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The difference between production and consumption informs group show *Making Is Thinking*, curated by Zoë Gray and assisted by Amira Gad at the Witte De With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam. Featuring the work of 15 artists, the show approaches a multitude of oppositional relationships, including form and content, thinker and maker, as well as conceptual and applied arts at a time when such debates are needed. As far as metaphors go, a separation between mind and body could easily describe increasing divisions between government and populace in a world driven by industrialised wants and needs.

The exhibition contemplates labour divisions that emerged from factory systems at the start of the Industrial Revolution in 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain; then known as the workshop of the world. This transformed Europe and the United States' productive capabilities, irrevocably changing societies in the process. Citing Matthew Crawford's book, *The Case for Working with Your Hands: or Why Office Work is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good* (2009) Gray explains: "Crawford makes various salient points about the way the mechanisation of labour and [Henry] Ford's creation of the assembly line [at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century] divided the craftsman's skill into the manager's knowledge and the workers' labour – a division that persists today in many fields. It is as if know-how was split in two: know and how. This has had wide-reaching ramifications on all areas of work and education – artistic or not."

While manufacturing processes separated concept, materiality and making, the traditional crafts diminished, as did the presence of the craftsman's hand, something Rita McBride's inkjet prints of pre-digital French curves and engineering tools evoke. As technology continues to evolve alongside the expanding industrial model, the distance between human input and industrial output widens, with efficiency, productivity and progress continuing to fuel a globalised reality where nations are organised under the industrial hierarchy

of primary, secondary and tertiary industry. Looking at Dewar & Gicquel's enlarged necklaces combining worry beads with battered helmets in *The Hairdresser's Birthday Treat* (2006) and wooden shells and cars with cricket bats in *Cocoa Turismo* (2006), the industrial legacies of imperialism, trade and consumption remain largely unresolved.

But do we have reason to fear those dark Satanic Mills that created a reaction against industrialisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Arts and Crafts Movement, led by William Morris and John Ruskin? Gray observes current parallels, but does not succumb to moral judgements. "An interest in craft is re-emerging in part as a reaction to the globalised economy and its re-localisation of production. However, for Ruskin, there was a close association between craft and morality, something that contemporary theorists of craft such as Glenn Adamson are keen to avoid. It would be naïve nowadays to suggest that craft is good, while industry is bad; things are not that simple ... The most interesting artists have always been those who combine brilliant ideas with exciting forms. I'm not so interested in the presumed division between making and thinking as in their fusion. The title establishes equivalence rather than opposition."

This invites a non-hierarchical assessment of art and life in a mechanised world nearly a century after the Duchampian readymade marked an artistic separation between thought and practice, commonly pinned on *Fountain* (1917). The industrially-produced urinal was presented, and rejected for lack of artistic integrity, as the world's first fully industrialised war was raging, forcing society to re-examine its structured reality on all levels, from methods of warfare to the relief of bodily urges. In doing so, Duchamp exposed divisions between designer, maker, and user as large as those between factory workers supplying weapons to frontline soldiers to those managing the conflict. This reclaimed thought and perspective in a society numbed by mindless mass-production



Alexandre da Cunha  
 (Background) *Green Fountain*, 2009.  
 Courtesy of the artist & Vilma Gold, London  
 Dimensions variable.  
 (Foreground) *Kentucky Macramé*, 2010.  
 Courtesy of the artist & Dennis Braddock & Ms. Janice Niemi  
 Installation photo Witte de With 2011; Bob Goedewagen.







Eva Rothschild, *SUPERNATURE*, 2008. Courtesy of the artist & The Modern Institute / Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow. Installation photo with 2011 Bob Goedevasagen.

intent for the latrine than its common association as benchmark upon which the traditional process of making is rejected in favour of a conscious critique on practice, exemplified in Lawrence Weiner's notorious *Declaration of Intent* (1968), which stated that thinking could replace making.

When explaining video work *About the Good and the Bad Sculpture* (2009), Houben notes that divisions between two objects into "good" and "bad" creates a duality that demands constant reinterpretation. In this sense, the potency of the readymade does not lie in the need to challenge or reaffirm its authority, but in its continuing – and developing – relevance. For example, how far do *Handcrafted Pick-axe* and *Handcrafted Trowels* (2003), handmade tools fashioned by Wilfrid Almendra with Dewar & Gicquel to look like their mass-produced counterparts, really challenge Duchamp's industrially-made wood and iron snow shovel *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915)? Gray posits; "In a sense, this absurdly time-consuming activity is a complete reversal of the readymade." Conversely, as *Fountain* critiqued mass-production in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, these contemporary "handmades" carry a similar reminder; though technology and industry directs the way we live, we still have the physical and mental tools to create new possibilities from existing realities.

But does this require a re-assessment of value in a world in which economy often overrides humanity? "It is absolutely about questions of value. Time is the most precious 'commodity' today and several of the works in the exhibition explore how we spend our time, and what value that activity is given." Gray uses Hans Schabus' *Der Turmbau zu Babel* (2010) as a case in point. In a sequence of framed jigsaw puzzles completed over one winter named after Bruegel's 16<sup>th</sup> century painting *The Tower of Babel* (1563), Schabus presents the puzzles on their reverse side. "Doing jigsaw puzzles is perhaps the least respected pastime, requiring little skill, but infinite patience. What does it mean when an artist such as Schabus presents these mute puzzles as highly eloquent artworks about art and work? What value do we put upon it? These are extremely interesting questions to me."

After the rise of boom-time artists in the late 1990s and early millennium, exemplified by Hirst, Koons and Murakami, who all worked within a factory-

based practice that often saw them oversee production of ideas rather than making work themselves, the role of the artist is a contentious issue from the perspective of human skill, monetary value and market integrity. Following the economic crash in 2008, does this more materialised, tactile approach reflect a change in perception of worth? Gray responds: "I think the term 'tactile art' is misleading. For me, Koons' work is extremely tactile. However, I do see a certain backlash against, or perhaps reassessment of, the dematerialised, globalised world in which we live in the West today. Across society there is a renewed interest in re-taking control of making processes as a way of becoming more engaged with and responsible for the things that surround us."

By challenging the industrial process, artists are taking steps towards reconciling the negative impacts of industry and the opportunities it represents. Eva Rothschild's formalist sculpture *SUPERNATURE* (2008) exists on three levels of the industrial process; mass-produced PVC sheets are wall-mounted to reflect a wooden frame designed by Rothschild and fashioned by technicians intertwined with leather and rope-like forms, hand-woven by the artist and assistants. "These different forms of making come together in one impressive work, which for me suggest a 'return to nature' of a piece of modernist sculpture as it is overgrown by the concrete jungle," explains Gray.

In the end, when it comes to making and thinking, or thinking and making, what's the difference? Either way, everyone needs to see, feel and understand. With the industrial age hurtling into an unknown future as evidenced in the nuclear crisis in Japan, the rise of China and India as industrial nations and their metamorphosis into consumer societies, *Making Is Thinking* is a timely and relevant exhibition. Along with the rising oil prices caused by political turmoil in North Africa and the Middle East, flexible re-unification of body and mind, craft and industry, artist and audience, production and consumption and a myriad other dualities prove useful in a world grappling with readymade structures desperately in need of re-evaluation, resolution, and inevitably, re-construction. Visit [www.wdw.nl](http://www.wdw.nl) for tickets and information.

Stephanie Bailey

