

# frieze

## THE NETHERLANDS Making is Thinking

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When Marcel Duchamp walked into J.L. Mott Iron Works in the Spring of 1917, accompanied by Joseph Stella and Walter Arensberg, it is unlikely that any of them would have described the Bedfordshire-model porcelain urinal that caught their attention as an 'off-the-shelf' product. This doesn't mean that it wasn't; it was – the expression just hadn't been coined yet. The first recorded use of the adjective 'off-the-shelf' was in 1950, 36 years after workers at Henry Ford's manufacturing plant reduced the assembly time of a Model T from half a day to 93 minutes using standardized parts and procedures. Not to belabour the point, but it would seem that language, rather than always offering the consolation of off-the-shelf words to make sense of our actions and thoughts, arrives after the fact.

I had this distinct sense looking at French artist Wilfrid Almendra's Handcrafted Pick-axe (2003) and two Handcrafted Trowels (2003), pristine reproductions of off-the-shelf implements made in collaboration with the artistic duo Daniel Dewar and Gregory Gicquel. Displayed in a Perspex vitrine, the buffed and engraved tools were more than reactionary memorials to the notion of physical labour; Almendra's artisanal creations are mute visualizations of the trio's enquiry into mass-production and standardization. They elegantly animated (rather than merely illustrated) curator Zoë Gray's theme for 'Making is Thinking', based on her interest in recent sociological enquiries into the alienation implicit in global capitalism's increasingly atomized and deskilled production processes.

Two books framed Gray's thinking for this show: Matthew Crawford's *The Case of Working with Your Hands or Why Office Work is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good* (2009), a popular broadside against 'ignorance of the world of artefacts', and Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman* (2008), a lapidary argument for the physical act of making as congruent and proximate to thinking. Famously, neither Crawford nor Sennett explicitly engages the visual arts, where the decoupling of labours of hand and head are pronounced. This omission allowed Gray some licence to fashion an idiosyncratic interpretation of Sennett's declaration that 'making is thinking'. Eschewing masonry, she presented a more applied and unstable reading, drawing on the practices of contemporary artists working with photography, video, sculpture and performance. The protagonists included Edgar Leciejewski, who makes austere photographic studies of the 'raw state' of his Leipzig studio, and Chicago native William J. O'Brien, whose pencil and ink drawings possess a rich materiality despite the hard-edged abstraction of their composition. Sculpture was well represented with Alexandre da Cunha's quixotic four-by-seven-metre ceiling-hung work made of mop-heads (Palazzo, 2009), and Rita McBride's freestanding red room divider, *Stratacolour* (2008), based on the shapes of plastic templates formerly used in technical drawing.

Unavoidably, there were cleavages between the conceptual terrain being mapped and the works themselves. What group exhibition framed around a speculative position doesn't get similarly tripped up? Peculiarly, many of the sculptural and photographic works tended toward a minimal formalism, and in some pieces, as in *Teppi*

[Kaneuji's Tower](#) (2009), a hand-drawn animation of a smoking tower, the evidence of making didn't always prompt a thinking reflex in the viewer. Diversions and dead-ends notwithstanding, Gray managed to piece together a 'strangely coherent sprawl' (an expression I borrow from Scott [McLemee's](#) engaging review of [The Craftsman](#) in [Bookforum](#)).

The museum-quality pickaxe and trowels aside, standout contributions included Dutch artist Hedwig [Houben's](#) video discussions of her sculptural practice ([About The Good and The Bad Sculpture](#), 2009, and [Colour and Shapes, A Short Explanation of My Artistic Practice](#), 2010), from its rootedness in geometric forms to why it sometimes fails. The deadpan narration, which is resolutely earnest but subtly mocking, lends the commentary a comic tension. It also suggests that making is a series of complications, difficulties and solutions that challenge the mind as much as frustrate the hand. Los Angeles-based Koki Tanaka, an admirer of Bruce [Nauman](#), also employs video, albeit as a tool for recording his fascination with cheap domestic objects, most of them plastic, and the peculiar sounds they make when [swivelled](#), twirled, thrown or kicked. [Everything is Everything](#) (2006) replays an infinite loop of Tanaka's field recordings of, variously, an [aluminium](#) ladder being kicked over, an inflatable bed falling down stairs, and two yellow hardhats colliding. Gee whiz, you appreciatively think.