RESISTING CANONICITY: TRANSLATING TRADITION, COMMUNITY, AND VOICE IN THE WORK OF THREE ARTISTS

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ABSTRACT

Trista Reis Porter: Resisting Canonicity: Translating Tradition, Community, and Voice in the Work of Three Artists
(Under the direction of Bernard L. Herman)

My dissertation addresses the problems of canon formation within the reception of contemporary art. Placing in conversation the pottery of Chris Luther, the textile art of Dominie Nash, and the mixed media sculptures of the artist known only as the Philadelphia Wireman, I consider how each artist’s work has confronted the reductive effects of canon formation. Their reception reveals the ways in which canons respond to and reinforce marginalizing qualities of alterity, especially through assumptions or expectations about an artist’s background or medium. The notion of the expected and its relationship to the reception of artists and alterity within and surrounding art historical canons in particular illuminates what I identify as three primary processes of category making: flattening, centering, and haunting. I investigate these along with the multitude of other ways in which artists present themselves to the public, as well as how people have written about and perceived their work. Each chapter explores a related set of questions concerning the artist, their practice, how their work has been received, and how each resists canonical thinking. I consider the unique challenges and ideas presented by their work, and the ways in which they introduce new possibilities for interpretation and illuminate common themes across medium and genre.

I begin with the pottery of Chris Luther to explore the question of tradition. I consider how his Bridge Bowl in particular bridges the multitude of influences on his practice and
ultimately illuminates the breadth and depth of Seagrove, North Carolina’s long and growing global pottery tradition. I connect these ideas of *tradition* to those of *community* by discussing the role of artistic, ideological, and aesthetic networks within Dominie Nash’s textile art practice. Within both artists’ practices, there is a negotiation between creativity and conventional ideas of tradition and community that is somewhat fluid. I finally turn to the question of *voice* as another important exploratory tool—one in need of greater focus and expansion. I investigate the contested and conflicted reception of the unknown Philadelphia Wireman, which represents a particularly fraught example of the problematic impulses and effects of canon formation.
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INTRODUCTION.
LOCATING “OUTSIDERNESS” AND THE PROBLEM OF CANONS

My dissertation addresses the problems of canon formation and its relationship to the reception of insiders and outsiders within the contemporary art world. There are numerous definitions of canon, but the art historical canon (or canons) in particular comprises the categories of artists, mediums, and groups broadly agreed-upon as representing the dominant art form of any period, especially within or somehow related to western art. I begin here because art historical canons have had a concretizing impact on the ways in which people continue to find value in and make meaning of all art. Canonical figures represent an elite few and so an artist or artwork considered canonical typically conforms to a set of criteria delineating what is in, and what (or who) is out.¹

A major portion of the field of art history is mapped by canons. As an example of this, Juan Pablo Bonta discusses Mies van der Rohe’s German Pavilion at the Barcelona Exhibition of 1929 (Figure 1.1), explaining that only before its categorization as canonical could alternative interpretations be explored: “So strong was the impact of this [canonical] interpretation in 1960 that for more than a decade nothing else could be said about the Pavilion.”² Bonta discusses the differences between non- or pre-canonical and canonical interpretations, “found not in content


but in the ways in which interpretations operate within society.” Canonical interpretations, he explains, “appear to be conclusive” and are “shared by an entire community, or at least by an identifiable section of it—the academic and professional sub-cultures, for example, or a group within them.”

Even as dominant discourses, ideologies, and aesthetics shift over time and canonical boundaries are negotiated accordingly, the core art historical figures and canonical works—for example, Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* (1503), and later, Pablo Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907)—remain stable. In this way, canon formation is both normative and circular; as cultural researcher Rakefet Sela-Sheffy articulates, “Time and again we end up pointing at the bad guys, who are always those in power [and] who control the canon. And the solution is given

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4 Herman and Rhodes, “Canons, Collections, and the Contemporary Turn,” 243.
in advance, and is incredibly simplistic: resisting the canon is good.”\textsuperscript{5} Where, for example, Leonardo represented a canonical peak and proclivity toward realism during the Italian Renaissance and in the process helped set a standard for representational painters and sculptors to follow, avant-garde and modern artists such as Picasso became canonical by resisting the canon, such as through embracing abstraction over realism. As Sela-Sheffy suggests, there is a central paradox within this “reverse terror balance” as powerlessness becomes power: “For all the progressive, seemingly more complex, multi-layered and dynamic conception[s] of culture it propagates, in the final analysis the discourse on the canon fails to exceed the limits of the same old reductive conception of official, high Culture which it aspires to challenge.”\textsuperscript{6} Those that resist the canon become canonical and the canon accumulates even as it continues to exclude. In this way, canons represent an abstract consolidation of cultural power.\textsuperscript{7} While my project primarily concerns issues of canonicity and power within the scope of art history and material culture, its implications toward debates about inclusivity, exclusivity, identity, and culture range well beyond this to fields such as literature and history.

American historian Lawrence Levine, for example, examined historical tendencies to equate the notion of culture with that of hierarchy in \textit{Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America}. His project concerned “the world in which things could not be truly compared because they were so rarely laid out horizontally, next to one another, but were always positioned above or below each other on an infinite vertical scale.”\textsuperscript{8} Cultural categories,


\textsuperscript{6} Sela-Sheffy, “Canon Formation Revisited”: 142-3.

\textsuperscript{7} Herman and Rhodes, “Canons, Collections, and the Contemporary Turn,” 242-3.

he argued, were products of specific historical moments and carried different weight at different
times, and throughout the book, Levine is more critical of the tendency to employ categories
outside of the contexts in which they were created than he is of the question of whether
hierarchical categories should be employed altogether. Using the example of William
Shakespeare’s wide popularity in American theaters during the nineteenth century, Levine
described what he found to be more of a shared public culture, less hierarchically organized and
fragmented into “adjectival boxes” than it would be in the twentieth century. He believed that
this shared public culture was not necessarily a stable or homogenous one intentionally created
by nineteenth-century Americans. Rather, Americans at the time were fascinated by cultural
variety and speculated more about the forces that could unite this heterogeneity rather than
further isolate it.9

Despite critiques and other analyses within the broad scope of cultural studies, which
investigate, confront, and challenge perceived distinctions between high (or insider) and low (or
outsider) culture, canons continually reinforce this divide. Different groups promote canons of all
varieties at different times as a means of regulating culture.10 As hierarchical categories and
canons, especially the art historical canon, have grown, canonical subfields based on medium (ie:
painting, ceramics), genre (ie: still life, portrait), movement (ie: Impressionism, Futurism),
and/or school (ie: Hudson River School, Vienna School) have become structured canonical
systems in themselves, each representing a set of aesthetic and/or ideological values and
assessments. Numerous subfields of art, however, are not represented in the western art historical
canon, and are qualified as different or other in some way. Labels such as “outsider,” “self-

9 Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow, 7-9.
10 Sela-Sheffy, “Canon Formation Revisited: Canon and Cultural Production”: 141.
taught, “folk,” or “vernacular,” for example, have come to signify a seemingly autonomous, yet amorphous body of work generally located within the margins of the “mainstream” canon. Here the relationship between canon formation and ideological and political processes becomes much more visible, especially around the question of *alterity*.¹¹

Simply, alterity can be defined as “otherness,” or a state of being other or different. Scholars of phenomenology such as Emmanuel Levinas, for example, situate alterity as the opposite to which one’s own identity is constructed.¹² In anthropology, however, alterity references the construction of “cultural others” within the maintenance of group culture, whether by westerners interacting with nonwestern cultures, or vice versa. As Michael Taussig explains, “[A]ll identity formation is engaged in this habitually bracing activity in which the issue is not so much staying the same, but maintaining sameness through alterity.”¹³ Importantly, alterity signifies a *relationship* between difference and an expected norm rather than a quality in itself. The implication of a cultural norm further connects alterity to differences in power, where those with social, cultural, and/or political influence establish normative, or canonical standards that have often led to the exclusion, marginalization, exploitation, homogenization, or victimization of the *other*.¹⁴

My project engages the relationship between alterity and canon formation through a close focus on the work and reception of a group of three artists perceived as *other* or *outsiders* in some way. Placing in conversation the pottery of Chris Luther, the textile art of Dominie Nash, Herman and Rhodes, “Canons, Collections, and the Contemporary Turn,” 243.


and the mixed media sculptures of the artist known only as the Philadelphia Wireman, I consider how each artist’s work has confronted the reductive effects of canon formation. Their reception reveals the ways in which canons respond to and reinforce marginalizing qualities of alterity, especially through assumptions or expectations about an artist’s background or medium. Importantly, my project expands on phenomenological and anthropological studies of alterity, identity, culture, and art by investigating the creative ways that artists also differentiate or distinguish themselves from the expected and previously limited canonical ideas of tradition, place, and medium.

Canons epitomize the expected in their encompassing of categories and values so deeply naturalized that they tend to be accepted without question. The notion of the expected and its relationship to the reception of artists and alterity within and surrounding art historical canons in particular illuminates what I identify as three primary processes of category making and canon formation: flattening, centering, and haunting. Drawing from Unflattening, Nick Sousanis’ graphic novel and experiment in visual learning, the term flattening represents a form of narrow and rigid thinking. It responds to conformity, repetition, and pattern at different levels, and in this way, also establishes and responds to canons. In the process, flattening oversimplifies our perceptions of art, people, and culture more broadly, and continually reifies the impulse to categorize without questioning.

Sousanis’ project examines how humans have too often constructed knowledge both from a fixed viewpoint and along a flat plane. He describes the dangers of tunnel vision and seeing

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15 Herman and Rhodes, “Canons, Collections, and the Contemporary Turn,” 242-3.

16 I acknowledge that attempting to summarize Sousanis in text is paradoxical to his very practice. Perhaps future iterations of this project will incorporate other senses and ways of learning about and from artistic practices. Nick Sousanis, Unflattening (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 1-27.
only what we are looking to see, illustrating the importance of not trying to make things fit, but rather, seeing them as they are. By communicating all of this through a combination of text and imagery, Sousanis attempts to unflatten the ways in which we have learned to read and rely so heavily on text. Drawing from a number of visual references and the two-dimensional geometric inhabitants of Edwin A. Abbott’s 1884 novel *Flatland*, Sousanis illuminates a journey of seeing beyond the dimensions, both physical and metaphorical, in which we have been cultured to live, learn, and grow.

He also acknowledges our historical tendency toward centering ourselves, as humans, and perceiving the world from a fixed angle, and the ways in which it has restrained how we continue to learn and grow.17 To emphasize these processes of centering and decentering, Sousanis illustrates our solar system (Figure 1.2) and narrates, “Although Copernicus sought only to improve existing spherical models, by displacing the earth from the center and setting it spinning, he unwittingly sparked a revolution. Nothing changed, except the point of view—which changed everything.” This led, as Sousanis explains, to a “quest for reason” and desire to discover answers to “why?” and “how?” at the same time increasing specialization in fields: “This narrowing of focus led to fragmentation—a cascade of individual searchlights.” An unfortunate result of these increasingly individualized pursuits to understanding, Sousanis explains, was the stifling of communication across boundaries.18

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17 Sousanis’ idea of “unflattening” resonates with other theoretical and educational frameworks with which my project is similarly aligned. It responds to what biologist Jacob von Uexküll introduced with the concepts “umwelt” and “umgebung” in 1909. Umwelt represents the small subset of the world that an animal detects, while the bigger reality is the umgebung. As neuroscientist David M. Eagleman explains, the umwelt captures the idea of limited knowledge, unobtainable information, unimagined possibilities, and the need for greater intellectual humility as we appreciate that which falls outside of our previously assumed notions of reality.” See David M. Eagleman, “The Umwelt,” Edge, accessed January 4, 2018, https://www.edge.org/response-detail/11498; Sousanis, *Unflattening*, 1-27.

A static vantage point circled by all.

The Unflat Earth neatly at the core of the idea of harmoniously nested spheres.

Despite observations of how things moved across the sky that betrayed this thinking, deeply held beliefs led to the dismissal of alternatives - as inconceivable as "upwards not northwards."

In an effort to make the observations conform to the ideals, ever more ingenious models were constructed - performing mathematical back-ups, circles within circles.

Although Copernicus sought only to improve existing spherical models (relying on observations that had been around since Eratosthenes' time).

By displacing the Earth from the center and setting it spinning, he unwittingly sparked a revolution.

Nothing changed, except the point of view - which changed everything.

While others would expand upon this work.

The fundamental shift of viewpoint irrevocably ruptured a stadium of thought, its implications rippled outward...

And a sun-centered outlook would fuel further revolutions.
Sousanis’ statement is both historical and metaphorical, and it emphasizes the effects of both flattening and centering on knowledge production and cross-disciplinary communication. The idea of *unflattening* aligns with other *decentering* strategies important to my project. In particular, New Materialist Jane Bennett’s theories of *object agency* and *vibrant matter* respond to a decentering of the human animal to consider the vitality and centrality of objects in relationship to human and non-human animals as well as the environment. Bennett interrogates the “habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings),” which encourages us to ignore the vitality of matter and material formations. By decentering ideas and perceptions of “life” and their exclusive relationship to human and nonhuman animals rather than matter or objects, she hopes to illuminate a *vital materiality*, or *vibrant matter* at work around us.\(^\text{19}\)

Centering, especially *human* centering, is also a process of category and canon (and margin) formation, alongside flattening. Importantly, categories continue to be constructed by those exhibiting and writing about art, including me, as well as the artists themselves. While the canonical gravity and impulse to categorize is strong, part of my project’s efforts to decenter canons involves first acknowledging their presence and power. Secondly, a more expansive focus on object voice and agency has immense potential to disorient canons preoccupied with categories of human identity and their associations with ideas of tradition and community. Indeed, an artist’s means of identifying themself does not always align with the expected embodiment or naming of tradition and community, yet art has often been the subject of embodied, and in this case marginalized inscription. This is especially the case in the reception of artistic *others* such as those labeled “self-taught” or “outsider,” where greater attention is

regularly placed on an artist’s biography or background than the work they create—a topic to which I will return shortly.

The final process of canon formation related to my project concerns the ways in which artists are continually haunted by previous and ongoing discourses of their artistic practice, medium, and history. The concept of *haunting* comes from Jacques Derrida’s 1993 book, *Spectres of Marx*, and refers to a situation of temporal disconnectedness in which *apparent reality* is replaced by an absent or deferred non-origin. Musical scholars have adopted the term in reference to music preoccupied with this temporal disjunction and the nostalgic hopes for “lost futures” embedded in it.\(^{20}\) Related to literature, however, Susan Stewart discusses the ways in which poetry is haunted by an image of the particularity of human voices: “the ways in which rhythms inhabit the body beyond volition; the ways in which others, including the dead, are manifested in the voice of the poet as an individual speaking person…”\(^{21}\) She continues: “Although poems are more often the outcome of many forces… [the] notion of haunting under terms that have outlived their referents is an account of poetic possession of tremendous power and uselessness.”\(^{22}\) Furthermore, Stewart explains, “To set out to alter or displace reference in a poem is to attempt, by mastering contingency itself, to master completely the situation of writing,” which is to say, altering or displacing references that haunt a poem (or song, painting, etc.), is very difficult.\(^{23}\) I similarly employ the concept of *haunting* to refer to the reception of


\(^{22}\) Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 115.

\(^{23}\) Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 116.
certain types of art. All of the artists I discuss are haunted by the western art canon and narrow ideas of tradition and community, but my project also addresses how each artist confronts their own individual specters based on medium, background, or other contexts for their work.

A useful backdrop for haunting within my project is Charles Taylor’s idea of a social imaginary. A social imaginary, according to Taylor, references “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”

Taylor employs the term to focus on the ways in which large groups of people similarly imagine their social surroundings, and how imaginaries are carried into images, stories, and understandings that make common practices and a shared sense of legitimacy possible. Importantly, the normative sense of how things usually go is interwoven with ideas of how they ought to go. In this way, social imaginaries perpetuate the haunting of certain associations, expectations, and stereotypes—many of which are present in the reception and canonization of art.

In an effort to disrupt and disorient canonical categorizations and implications of the expected and the processes of flattening, centering, and haunting imbedded within them, my project focuses closely on the notion and possibilities of the unexpected object. Within the context of art and its reception, unexpected objects imply some sort of oppositional relationship to the expected. They are the tangible things that, in one way or another, reject the haunted, centered, and flattened expectations placed upon artists and their practice, and in this way, illuminate the capacities of things to disrupt and disorient in general. Importantly, both the


expected and the unexpected require an awareness of subjectivity and perspective, and understanding that perceptions of expected or unexpected vary over time, from place to place and person to person, and between and among multiple other subjectivities, whether they are geographic, cultural, social, political, economic, religious, etc. in nature. An object that appears unexpected to me may not represent what the object’s creator perceives as unexpected, and this notion of variable perspective, especially as it relates to the reception of objects created by artists, is an important one to my decentering and unflattening project.

Furthermore, as mentioned through the example of Pablo Picasso, even the notion of rebelling against the canon by creating something new or unexpected represents an expected canonical process with deep historical precedents. In this case, the unexpected maintained some relationship to canon formation as firstly, a direct response to the canon, and secondly, by being labeled as “canonical” in hindsight. To resist canonicity, then, is not necessarily to evade canons altogether, but rather, to straddle the expected and the unexpected, thereby blurring, critiquing, or erasing the lines that separate who is inside or outside a canon’s parameters. Chris Luther, Dominie Nash, and the Philadelphia Wireman all straddle this line by producing objects that are, at least from my perspective, unexpected, whether for their medium, geographical community, cultural background, or some other quality of their artistic or personal identity.

In response to the flattening, centering, and haunting processes embedded within canon formation and constructions of alterity, the notions of unflattening and decentering, especially through greater attention to the unexpected object, are useful for thinking about inter, multi, cross, or transdisciplinarity, and function on multiple levels for my project. They inspire a more critical consideration of my own methodologies and ways of looking and learning, the creative processes of artists, which are widely expansive, fluid, and expressive of the multiple worlds that
surround them, and the capacity of objects to inspire, transfix, and elicit a multitude of responses. Perception, as illustrated in *Unflattening*, is itself a dynamic activity. Just as our bodies are constantly in motion—whether at the micro or visible level—our minds are constantly observing, consuming, and making sense of what we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste in relationship to what we have previously experienced.\(^{26}\) Unflattening and decentering therefore subvert canonical borders founded on expectations of cultural, social, and artistic continuity, training, influence, and method by recognizing that artists similarly perceive and create work, whether consciously or not, based on what they see and encounter on a day-to-day basis. In each chapter, I therefore aim to illustrate the breadth and depth of each artists’ practices, experiences, and/or reception, and how they subvert previously limited viewpoints. I argue for perspectives of seeing, engaging with, and learning and writing about objects that are multiplicitous and in need of continual revision.

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In order to address the issues of canon formation and the processes of flattening, centering, and haunting embedded within them, my project taps into methodologies and theoretical frameworks springing from an array of disciplines. Given the nature of the work I pursue, previous scholarship on art historical categorization and canon formation, especially that which interrogates the marginalization of artists deemed “outsider” or “other,” has been central to my project. Much of this type of investigation however, has ignored a broader analysis across genres, communities, and artistic traditions. It is this lacuna in cross-media examination that my project fills by exploring the unlikely parallels and overlaps between three contemporary artists working in a variety of media. In lieu of a tangible location, such as an exhibition, gallery, or

\(^{26}\) Sousanis, *Unflattening*, 72-82.
manuscript in which the work of these three artists would appear altogether, I create a space in which they can converse and shed light on the universality of canonicity and its effects on the reception of expressive culture.

I have augmented this art historical and material culture scaffolding with a variety of perspectives from other disciplines, including education, anthropology, philosophy, archaeology, literature, political science, folklore, and more. In locating parallels between these fields, I owe much to many scholars’ expertise, but also aim to exact new demands on their theoretical frameworks by applying them to the practices and reception of contemporary artists working in a variety of media. By placing theories of flattening, centering, and haunting in conversation with scholarship on craft, outsider, self-taught, folk, and vernacular art, my project draws attention to the cyclical processes of categorization across mediums, disciplines, and fields. Whether it applies to material, visual, literary, or some other version of cultural expression, the establishing of canonical insiders also creates marginalized outsiders. In some cases, this impulse to categorize creates new canons for those on the margins.

One example of this is the canon of outsider art. The term “outsider art” comes from British writer Roger Cardinal, who coined it in 1972 as an English-language equivalent for the French Art Brut. As Colin Rhodes explains in *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives*, this group of artist outsiders included:

…those labeled as dysfunctional through pathology (usually, though not always, in terms of psychological illness), or criminality (often in tandem with the first), or because of their gender or sexuality, or because they appear to be in some way anachronistic, or are seen as un(der)developed, or often simply because of a cultural identity and religious belief that is perceived as significantly different.²⁷

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As Rhodes suggests, the reception of outsider, as well as folk, self-taught, and vernacular art, tends to follow a problematic formula. An unschooled artist is “discovered” by someone with an acute sense of artistic taste and knowledge. They see their art as the product of “intuitive” or “innate” genius, unrestrained and unfettered by the world of academic, “fine,” or “high” art. Sellers market their works based on the most curious or bizarre aspects of the artist’s biography—for example, their divine inspiration, mental instability, or reclusive lifestyle—rather than the artworks themselves. Within the discourse surrounding that artist, the discoverer continues to be promoted as an integral part of the story, and while the artist receives recognition for their work in a field that has long disregarded them, they are portrayed as unusual, dysfunctional, exotic, or naïve—other and marginal to what has long been canonized in the history of western art.\textsuperscript{28}

At the same time, this narrative continues to privilege the voice and authority of the discoverer or educated scholar over the voice of the artist and their art. Unlike artistic movements such as Impressionism or Cubism, however, outsider art does not refer to a stylistic tendency or historical movement, and rarely is it a designation embraced by artists on whom it is inscribed. The artists’ perceived alterity from dominant cultural norms is marked by exclusion from both the mainstream western art world and the cultures that support it, yet this exclusion has often been considered necessary for preserving the “purity” of outsider art. As Rhodes explains, this is “because the detachment of the creator proves the absence of deviousness or cynical manipulation of fashionable taste in the work on his or her part.”\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{28} For example, consider the biographies of outsider artists at the Ricco Maresca Gallery or the Fleisher-Ollman Gallery: http://www.riccomaresca.com/ and http://www.fleisher-ollmangallery.com/.

\textsuperscript{29} Rhodes, \textit{Outsider Art}, 15-6.
Like Rhodes, several scholars have written about artists falling under the parameters of outsider or self-taught art, and importantly, have interrogated the ways in which these artists have been received and categorized, especially through galleries, exhibitions, and collections. As Bernard Herman discusses in a published conversation with Rhodes, “[C]ollections are the material entities that reify the abstract notion of a canon as a privileged category subject to constant negotiation. Not unlike the relationship between language and speech, canons are the incremental utterances of collections (public and private), exhibitions, and galleries.”

Indeed, several exhibitions of outsider art over the last few decades have done more to preserve the marginalizing portrayals of these artists than they have to correct them.

My project builds on the critical work of scholars such as Rhodes and Herman, and is similarly animated by recent efforts within museums and other art institutions to challenge canonical thinking by moving artists on the margins more prominently into the public eye not as outsiders or outliers, but simply and plainly, as artists.

One model of this comes from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, whose mission is to include the contributions of southern African American artists within the historical and contemporary scope of American, rather than “folk” or “outsider” art by documenting,

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30 Herman and Rhodes, “Canons, Collections, and the Contemporary Turn,” 242.

31 The recent exhibition, “Outliers and American Vanguard Art,” for example, attempts to remove the baggage of “outsider” from artists who have worked mostly outside the mainstream art world, instead proposing “outliers” as their new categorical home. The exhibition focuses on moments in which the boundaries between these outliers and the “vanguard,” or American canon, became more porous. However, by situating these artists as “outliers” separate from the mainstream, rather than simply, as artists, it retains the marginalizing qualities of alterity imbedded in the outsider art canon. Similarly, Washington Post critic Philip Kennicott rightly addresses some of the unsettling questions rooted in the exhibition and its particular methods of engaging with the “outliers’” work: “The questions it asks imply a ‘we,’ which comes from an institutional point of view: What did we learn from the outliers? How do we define them? Why and how did we exclude them? How can we open our practice to their insights and gifts?” Phillip Kennicott, “They were once outsiders, but now are embraced as American artists,” The Washington Post, January 26, 2018, http://www.theintelligencer.com/entertainment/article/They-were-once-outsiders-but-now-are-embraced-as-12527680.php.
preserving, and promoting their work. Many of their efforts take the form of exhibitions, programs, and publications, as well as acquisitions to museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, High Museum of Art, New Orleans Museum of Art, and Ackland Art Museum. My own research has benefitted greatly from the catalogs and essays accompanying these recent exhibitions, which both recognize the previous absence and/or marginalization of this work in art historical discourse and offer new ideas situating this art more fully within the historical and contemporary scope of American art. The Souls Grown Deep Foundation is an example of the kind of unflattening and decentering work with which my project aligns. Resisting canonicity is an important part of their mission, and their work has been vital to confronting the processes of flattening, centering, and haunting within canon formation and their impact on artists who have been consigned to the margins because of their perceived differences from “mainstream” artists, whether in terms of artistic training, choice in medium, and/or geographical, class, race, or national origins.

Beyond the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, many museums have begun to feature exhibitions and devote permanent gallery spaces to craft, folk, vernacular, self-taught, and outsider art. Even more noteworthy is the integrating of these works within galleries of American and/or contemporary art. Museums and exhibitions are integral to shifting ideas about canons and categories, especially by moving away from labels such as “self-taught” or “outsider” altogether. For this reason, my project focuses on reception and the places where art meets its


audience. In a similar manner to critical scholars of outsider and self-taught art, my project investigates and interrogates the reception of artistic mediums considered other in order to examine the categorizing and canonizing impulses implicit in all of them. The reception of outsider art and mediums such as textiles or pottery, for example, are rarely thought of in parallel terms, but my project focuses closely on these connections across media.

I utilize and advance the framework of translation to contextualize this reception and its parallels to processes of flattening, centering, and haunting. In light of tendencies to both reduce the role of objects in the world to ideas of design, making, use, and waste and embrace them as concrete facts, translation can illuminate the ambiguities inherent in things. I borrow Bernard Herman’s definition of translation as “an act of rendering something (word, image, action, thing) accessible in terms that are familiar and comprehensible… Translation also entails the belief that what is foreign can be made familiar, and the recognition that the process of translation is always incomplete in its inability to fully communicate nuance and idiom.” Furthermore, in relation to material culture, translation is not just about making the alien familiar, but also about making the familiar strange. By investigating translations, Herman considers questions that things themselves enable and how they compel us to see beyond convention. When we seek multivocality, objects invite fresh considerations.  

Herman’s ideas of translation and materiality closely resonate with Lynn Meskell’s work on object worlds. Meskell interrogates taxonomies and categorization by critiquing the idea that objects and subjects are discrete and essential entities inhabiting particular, impermeable worlds. She argues, “Since materiality is not readable as a given set of conditions or practices common to

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all cultures and all times, it is surely necessary to study specific cultural moments to understand contextual notions of the material world and its propensity to forge, shape, interpolate, and possibly even challenge and undermine social relations and experiences.”

In this way, Meskell’s idea of object worlds parallels many aspects of Howard Becker’s sociological study of art worlds. Art worlds contain and affect both the production and consumption of art. An approach to art worlds explores “an understanding of the complexity of the cooperative networks through which art happens.” An art or object world includes the artists, critics, connoisseurs, dealers, and all others in some way tied to a work of art, and is therefore a useful concept for my project on artistic reception and categorization within art markets and how all members of any given art or object world influence each other.

Working primarily in the field of archaeology, Meskell implores others to think critically about the imposition of categories, especially those inflected with western thinking. In an effort to reconsider previous constructions of object worlds, she studies local understandings in the contextualization of objects. Within this practice, she argues for theories of object agency that enhance our understandings of people’s intentions and practices and of objects as more than lifeless and isolated parts of singular, stable worlds. Objects are made and used by a much

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37 Meskell, Object Worlds in Ancient Egypt, 58.

38 Judy Attfield similarly responds to the lack of attention paid to the larger part of an object’s biography, especially when it has become part of the disordered everyday clutter of the mundane. This “wildness,” as she calls it, invites a new way of looking at things. To see things as “wild” is to look at what they do, and how they affect the state of things outside of their initial designed expression. In this way, wildness is both a state of detachment and possibility wide open for innovation and reinvention, and things present new ways in which they can speak to us. See Judy Attfield, Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 5-7.
broader population among many cultures and are thus more representative as a source of information than words.\(^{39}\) Objects speak about the places and narratives that surround them, and art objects in particular communicate a great deal about their makers, users, collectors, and the particular milieu in which they were made and continue to exist.

Since the 1980s, material culture scholars such as Meskell have made the conceptual move to understand artifacts not as fixed and stable entities, but as things in transition, both ephemeral and continuous. By focusing on transformation and the interweaving of material culture and social life in looking at processes of objectification, commodification, and incorporation, they have accounted for the ways in which “subject” and “object” are creations of the same process. Importantly, these perspectives require approaches that are driven by or centered on objects, as opposed to treating objects merely as illustrations on which meaning and categorization can be inscribed.\(^{40}\) An “ephemeral” lens toward material culture therefore traces objects’ fleeting responses to cultural shifts.\(^{41}\)

Literary scholar Wai Chee Dimock’s theory of resonance additionally considers texts and how they accrue new, sometimes conflicting and sometimes harmonious meanings as they enter new contexts and resonate across time and space.\(^{42}\) I argue for a similar approach to the study of objects, which considers the often-simultaneous interpretive impacts of the artist, their work, those that see, curate, and collect their work, and my own position as a scholar observing all of


these moving parts. The object worlds with which I am engaged represent broad interpretive spheres, in which the translations of some, often to the detriment of the artist and the art, are at times much louder than others. The receptive histories and narratives that surround their lives and art making processes always haunt artists and their works to some degree, and an important part of this project is to identify contentious areas of dissonance and friction within these histories and narratives. Diving head first into rather than shying away from these conflicted spaces has been central to the development of my thinking and writing process, and is an important step toward decentering canons and canonical narratives more broadly.

Where Dimock argues for theories of resonance and dissonance that democratize literature beyond western hegemony, Herman and Meskell respond to new forms of studying materiality and material culture and question how to expand that discourse in necessarily ongoing and open-ended ways. I reference art and object worlds and use the term “translation” throughout this project to acknowledge the temporariness of each object’s reading. I consider the reception of artists as well as their own perceptions of their work, and present new translations, some of which respond to or support previous translations, and some of which challenge the seemingly familiar or conventional. Rather than argue for a specific way of thinking about an artist and their work, using the term translation positions my own interpretations of these artists and their art as similarly subjective and temporary. By emphasizing the necessity of fluidity and focusing on the ways in which objects move through time and space, acquiring new meaning with each new translation, my project invites a dialogue that does not privilege my scholarly authority above others’. This process is necessarily speculative and in need of constant revision. It is about accumulating possibilities rather than restricting or setting them in concrete terms.43 I

43 This relates to what Clifford Geertz discusses as “thick description.” It responds to how we center our subjects of inquiry, not as someone or something in need of a concrete analysis, but rather, open to
hope my expansive and inclusive approach will shed light on the multitude of ways that objects and their makers can be studied, taught, curated, written about, researched, and observed.

The written reception of the three artists I discuss follow markedly different trajectories, and the nature of each artist’s work, medium, and background has required a variety of different primary and secondary sources. I am especially indebted to the practices of collaborative ethnography—a theoretical and methodological approach that deliberately and explicitly emphasizes collaboration at every point during the research process. Ethnography involves the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant-observation, and typically results in a written account of a people, place, or institution. In the late twentieth century, ethnographers interested in the insights of dialogue began to move away from the authoritative monologue writing style that previously dominated the field and toward a more involved exchange with the people they observed and with whom they spoke. Collaborative ethnography expands this process by further incorporating the ethnographer and consultant’s collaborative reading and interpretation of the written scholarship within later iterations, even to the extent that it discusses disagreements with the ideas written by the scholar or other areas of dissonance within the interpretation and writing process. In his guide to collaborative ethnography, Luke Eric Lassiter describes this process as one of honesty:

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…of placing co-interpretation squarely in the world of coexperience, intersubjectivity, and dialogue rather than distance, objectivity, and authority. Being forthcoming about how co-interpretations arise (in their beginnings, middles, and ends) shifts the nature of the ethnographic project from the conventional, albeit now fading, enterprise in which the expert ethnographer uncovers the unknown secrets of culture while maintaining distance and authority by *not* critically examining his or her own experience, to a dialogue and potentially collaborative undertaking in which the experience of the ethnographer and those of the interlocutors coexist on the same footing.48

Though my project is far from the immersive methods of other ethnographers, I am committed to the ethics of collaborative ethnography, which center on reflexivity, transparency, and an overall responsibility to my consultants.

In this way, I recognize my own viewpoint as one in dialogue with the artists and their work. Where direct communication with the artists was possible, their voice surfaces through direct quotes selected from interviews and ideas translated through my own words and perspectives, but developed in dialogue with them throughout the research and writing process. Elsewhere, I interpret and respond to the artworks they produce and how they focus and drive the range of topics either addressed through conversations or observed through my later analysis. Most of the ideas presented throughout this project are filtered and articulated through my own viewpoint, but I continually aim for reflexivity and mindfulness of my own subjectivity. I have also kept the lines of communication open with my consultants, inviting their reflexivity and thoughts on my observations and conclusions.

Because my project is also about reception and discourse, I investigate narrative and the multitude of other ways in which artists present themselves to the public, as well as how people have written about and perceived their work. I strive for a balance between these perspectives, and between the artist’s background, the work they produce, and how both connect to the broader ideas of individual and group identity, community, and tradition, along with the

processes of flattening, centering, and haunting foregrounding categorization and canon formation. Each chapter explores a related set of questions concerning the artist, their practice, how the public has received their work, and how each of these resist canonical thinking and expand material culture focuses and approaches. Throughout, I consider the unique challenges and ideas presented by each artist, and the ways in which they introduce new ideas for analysis and interpretation and illuminate common themes across medium and genre.

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Proceeding from the critical stance laid out here, I turn first to Chris Luther to explore the question of tradition. Beginning with Luther’s Bridge Bowl—the unexpected object that first inspired this project—I consider how it both bridges and contains the multitude of influences on his practice and ultimately illuminates the breadth and depth of Seagrove, North Carolina’s long and growing global pottery history. The Bridge Bowl, I argue, is an anomaly within the Seagrove pottery tradition and even within the larger body of Luther’s work, yet is representative of a more fluid and generative idea of tradition. I discuss the ways in which tradition—as an idea and tangible entity in Seagrove—has too long been understood as something old-fashioned, historical, stable, and distinctly local, qualifiers that ignore the centrality of innovation to traditional potters’ practices. For decades, Seagrove has been celebrated for its two distinct and canonical formal traditions: the early utilitarian pottery representative of self-sustaining farming communities and the need to preserve water and food, and the Art Pottery wares of the mid-twentieth century, which represent the impacts of industrialization and globalization on the declining need for production pottery and the introduction of new ceramic shapes, glazes, and aesthetics in general. This chapter situates Seagrove pottery within an even broader global context and contends that the processes and products of both creating and maintaining a specific
local and traditional identity in Seagrove is itself a product of globalization. To address these ideas, I introduce Arjun Appadurai’s theories about locality and globalism in his writings on circulation, as well as various folklorists’ definitions of tradition—all of which launch understandings of the Seagrove pottery tradition more fully and vibrantly into the present.

Throughout this chapter, I focus closely on Chris Luther’s practice, background, and the ideas presented by the Bridge Bowl. Interviews with Luther have revealed his pride as a fourth-generation Seagrove potter as well as his desire to be known for the work he makes rather than the geographical community in which he lives and works. His own ideas of tradition in Seagrove respond to outdated assumptions of the local art market and thus he situates his own practice outside of this in a multitude of ways. He talks at length about his memories of family members, mentors, and other local potters in the region, but also regularly mentions global ideas and aesthetics such as Japanese mingei pottery. Easy access to the artist’s voice, in this case, is instrumental in illuminating the dynamism of tradition and the simultaneous influences of the local and global on Luther’s and others’ pottery practices. Luther’s work, and the Bridge Bowl in particular expand understandings of tradition as a tool for breaking down canonical boundaries in order to explore the fluidities of creative and cultural identity and their varying relationships with the past and present central to any artist’s practice.

I connect these ideas of tradition to those of community in chapter two by discussing the importance of artistic, ideological, and aesthetic networks within Dominie Nash’s textile art practice. Like Luther, Nash creates works unexpected for her medium, and within both artists’

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49 Ideology is “the unarticulated, unspoken system of values and beliefs that inform every day social relationships… and inform community through aesthetics and affect,” and aesthetics is, “not a philosophy of the beautiful, but the balance and proportion of being in the world.” Both relate to broader systems and understandings of order or “rightness,” but I am interested in how my consultants make sense of the multitude of ideologies and aesthetics they encounter, and ultimately construct their own. Bernard L. Herman, “Ideology” (lecture, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, March 31, 2015).
practices, there is a negotiation between creativity and conventional ideas of tradition that is somewhat fluid. I frame this chapter around two central ideas presented by Nash in interviews: the *quilt paradox* and a *textile sensibility*. Nash describes the former as a place that is both outside categorization and specific to textile artists like her, who distance themselves from traditional quilt practices, yet are continually confronted with assumptions about the textile medium, especially through a strong focus on technique over composition or innovation. Additionally, the *quilt paradox* references the tired associations made between quilts, women’s hobbies, and domestic work, which haunt contemporary textile artists and consign them to a category and community that flattens the creativity and expansiveness of their practice and networks. Many textile artists have focused their efforts on a variety of aesthetic and ideological approaches to either sustain, challenge, or subvert these assumptions. Some reject quilt history entirely while others prize the historical and communal tradition above individual innovation. Still others, like Nash, find a balance between the historical tradition and innovative compositions and techniques drawn from a variety of mediums, aesthetics, and ideologies. In the first part of this chapter, I discuss the important ideas of artists and scholars within the field of textile art, including Susan Bernick and Jean Ray Laury, and the parallels between Nash’s experiences and textile art’s arrival in the broader contemporary art world.

In contrast to the *quilt paradox*, which responds to canonizing assumptions about community within the reception of textile art, a *textile sensibility* is more illustrative of the actual processes of working with textiles and the networks that connect contemporary textile artists. Nash describes qualities inherent in fabric that motivate her to continue working in this medium and connect her to others with shared interests in textiles, even if her compositions are more representative of styles from other media and genres. In the second part of chapter two, I
consider *textile sensibilities* and their connections to ideas of *community* within Nash’s practice and the many creative groups with which she associates. Textile sensibilities are both universal and personal, and Nash’s particular sensibility comprises her collage-like process and interest in the spontaneity of fabric. I argue that the complexities of Nash’s art, as illuminated through her work and our conversations, expand previous ideas of *community* and challenge the exclusive and canonical practices of sorting artists according to medium, background, and group affiliation.

Chapter three introduces *voice* as another important exploratory tool for art historical and material culture research, and one in need of greater focus and expansion. I investigate the contested and conflicted reception of the Philadelphia Wireman, which represents a particularly fraught example of the problematic impulses and effects of canon formation. The works of this artist were allegedly found in an alley of a historically African American neighborhood in Philadelphia in the late 1970s, but their maker remains unknown. The lack of audible or written artistic voice for the Wireman therefore confounds the easy sense of agency and voice presented in chapters one and two, and requires a different kind of focus. In lieu of a known identity, scholars, dealers, and other professionals considered “experts” in the fields of outsider and African art created a speculative biography for the artist, who, they proposed, was an African American man producing Americanized iterations of West African spirit objects. Not only is the reception of the Philadelphia Wireman missing an audible artistic voice, but what has been presented through translations of the works is highly contentious. For this reason, I explore the prevailing ideologies of *primitivism* and *fetishism* and their parallels to the discovery and reception of the Philadelphia Wireman. I also consider the importance of *voice*, as well as its shortcomings by providing an in-depth analysis of previous translations of the Wireman works
and the voices that surround them, their tendency to confine rather than liberate this unknown maker, and their impact on subsequent interpretations of the art.

The example of the Philadelphia Wireman elucidates the importance of attending to *voice* as a subjective rather than objective practice. Within the canonizing processes of flattening, centering, and haunting, the illusion of objectivity through a strong focus on *voice* as a primary resource has led to tendencies to overemphasize singular rather than multifaceted contexts in response, for example, to an artist’s biography, training, or cultural background. In order to respectfully and responsibly interpret the work that any artist produces, we must observe the influences of their networks extending in multiple directions, their continual perception and circulation of ideas and aesthetics, the overall fluidity of artistic identity, and the inherent subjectivity and multiplicity of *voice*. Throughout this chapter, I reference Jane Bennett’s theory of *assemblages* as a framework for understanding and organizing the relationships between the Wireman’s many translators, or voices, and the works themselves. I consider how the art has circulated and been received by identifying the wire sculptures as forces within larger networks of both human and nonhuman actants. By recognizing the unsteady, anthrocentric relationship between the sculptures and their many translators, I propose future directions for the Wireman that move beyond the discovery narrative and speculative biography continually haunting the artworks.

The story of the Philadelphia Wireman requires an unflattened and decentered approach and understanding of identity. It questions both the necessity and value of establishing an embodied community, tradition, and identity that is so heavily human-centered, especially when previous interpretations have done more to limit the artist’s voice than explore the objects’

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50 Bennett uses the term “actant” as a substitute for “what in a more subject-centered vocabulary are called agents.” Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 9.
unfettered potential for meaning. Drawing from a previous exhibition featuring the Wireman sculptures, I discuss a potential community for the Philadelphia Wireman under traditions of accumulation, transformation, and reuse. At the same time, I recognize the challenges of asserting a new context for the Wireman works, ultimately arguing for an approach that is more transparent, reflexive, and in need of continual revision.

My concluding chapter considers the future trajectories of my project, which I consider ongoing, and synthesizes its critical contributions to the field of material culture studies and beyond. I return to ideas of transformation and reuse and how they might, similar to the Wireman, apply to the ideological and material practices of Luther and Nash, along with other artists or communities. I also revisit the idea of crowd-sourced reception introduced in chapter three and expand on its potential as an approach beyond the parameters of this project. As introduced through recent creative and educational responses to the Philadelphia Wireman, crowd sourcing resonates with the generative and creative possibilities of increased collaboration, transparency, reflexivity, and open-endedness within art-based research, writing, teaching, and museum practices.

My project’s cross-media examination of Luther, Nash, and the Wireman’s work introduces these ideas by creating a metaphorical space in which the artists can interact and respond in parallel ways to the influences of canons on artistic reception. Each artist illuminates one of this project’s three central ideas, but the overlaps between tradition, community, and voice are distinctly apparent. Throughout, I recognize where voice is evident or lacking and explore the places where imaginaries of tradition and community meet their lived actuality in and around these artists’ lives and work. While tradition, community, and voice respond to previous marginalizing practices within the reception of art, they also suggest generative potential futures
by helping us understand how artists are connected to many communities or traditions and positioned between multiple categories with borders that are much more fluid. By putting their work in conversation, my dissertation breaks down the barriers that normally separate artists according to medium, genre, background, or other categorizing and embodied qualifiers.

I frame part of this concluding discussion by narrating the perspective of an attendee of the 2017 New York *Outsider Art Fair* and what it illustrates about the continued prevalence of fetishizing tropes which simultaneously marginalize and delineate who is *in* and who is *out* in the outsider art canon. While the *Outsider Art Fair* represents a particular form of reception that, within the parameters of my project, is specific to the Philadelphia Wireman, whose work has appeared there in previous years, this narrative reveals the ongoing problems of canon formation, categorization, flattening, centering, and haunting that I challenge throughout my project. I compare this review of the *Outsider Art Fair* to Chris Luther and Dominie Nash’s perspectives of venues in which their work been shown, especially the *Celebration of Seagrove Potters* and *Quilt National*. Luther and Nash are far from the worlds and markets of outsider art, yet face similar experiences as “outsiders” in some way. No single canon-driven context fits all three artists, and this lack of overlap speaks to the very issues of categorization and canon formation, and previously reductive approaches to tradition, community, and voice. My cross-media approach therefore transcends canonical and institutional limitations to consider the parallels of each artist’s work, experiences, and/or reception, and how they spans ideas of the expected and unexpected.
CHAPTER 1.
DEFINING TRADITION IN GLOBAL SEAGROVE, NORTH CAROLINA:
CHRIS LUTHER’S _BRIDGE BOWL_\(^{51}\)

As a bridge between the expected and unexpected, Chris Luther’s _Bridge Bowl_ (Figures 2.1-2.2) epitomizes canonical resistance. The process of creating the _Bridge Bowl_ reflects the continuity and cultural transmission of Luther’s training as a fourth-generation Seagrove, North Carolina-based potter, while its ideological and aesthetic foundations reveal the dynamism and invention of his practice. The _Bridge Bowl_ tells the iconic narrative of this particular place in the North Carolina Piedmont and the landscape, people, traditions, and ideas that animate it, at the same time illuminating the haunted and flattened nature of this narrative. However, it also speaks of globalization, the increasing circulation of ideas and images around the world, and their ever-evolving manifestations in the American South. In appearance and utility, the _Bridge Bowl_ bears little outward relation to Luther’s family or community pottery practice, or any specific global ideology or aesthetic. It is an anomaly in Seagrove and the larger body of Luther’s work, yet by powerfully connecting his position between the historical and local practice in which he was trained and his expansive influences from elsewhere, it illuminates the fluid qualities of _tradition_ central to the past and present Seagrove pottery community.

Luther’s distinctive mode of self-making and balance between family, local, and global traditions similarly disrupts expectations of canonical Seagrove pottery and broadens typically

\(^{51}\) An abbreviated version of this chapter previously appeared as an article in the “southern things” issue of _Southern Cultures_. See Trista Reis Porter, “Bridging Voice and Identity: Chris Luther’s _Bridge Bowl_ and the Seagrove Tradition,” _Southern Cultures_ 23, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 70-8.
fixed and reductive notions of artistic categories, communities, and identity in general.

Importantly, Luther’s fluidity between ways of defining himself and his work expresses a level of mobility that exists all over Seagrove; his networks of inspiration and their tangible outcome exemplify just one example of the range of artists working in Seagrove today, all of whom have their own set of communities and traditions that influence them. Their expansive practices, like Luther’s, more suitably fall along a *continuum* of the Seagrove tradition, rather than on either side of a tired and inaccurate dichotomy between traditional or not.

Through a close examination of Chris Luther’s *Bridge Bowl* and the ways in which he makes, discusses, and presents his work for public consumption, this chapter considers the local and global aesthetics of his practice and the Seagrove pottery community more broadly. I begin with a description of Luther’s process to provide a lens through which the relationship of the
local and the global in Seagrove can be more properly defined. I position Seagrove pottery history and contemporary practice within its long global context, paralleled by details of Luther’s background, influences, and contemporary practice. Throughout, I examine how ideas of tradition and its ties to the local materialize as recurring aesthetics and ideologies in a town once thought to be relatively isolated, but which has always been deeply and increasingly entrenched in globalization. In this way, Luther’s Bridge Bowl represents a more lively and unflattened interpretation of tradition, which accounts for the ebbs and flows of potters’ practices over time.

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The idea for the Bridge Bowl occurred to Luther by chance:

I wanted an oval bowl, and so the problem with an oval bowl: you turn a cylinder without a bottom and then you stretch it to make an oval. But when you stretch it, the center rises up, and then you end up trimming and trimming, and the sides are short and the center is tall. And I just didn’t like it, so I said, “Well, I’m going to exaggerate it and just add an arch to the whole thing.” The problem is, this bottom piece shrinks in so many different directions compared to the walls, that I always get cracks usually in the ends. So, my solution was to use finish nails to go through the bottom and into the wall, and they looked like a big black burn on the bottom… I said, “Okay, I’ll try sewing pins.” (Figure 2.3) So these are sewing pins… this is how one idea leads to the next. In putting the bottom in this one day, it was rocking back and forth. I said, “I ought to incorporate this in my work somehow.” So, I threw a rocking pitcher (Figure 2.4). That’s how that evolved… but I still haven’t perfected that. This is the big thing. But you know how some things you just can’t give up? I guess that’s one of my many Achilles’ heels.52

Trial and error taught Luther to start by throwing a cylinder and letting its stiffen before taking it off the wheel form and stretching it upside down. After draping it from different sides, he repositions and adjusts it in a wooden form that helps hold its shape until it dries enough to not move, but remains wet enough to take on new clay. At this point, he applies the bottom slab and feet, both of which have undergone changes in the Bridge Bowl’s multiple iterations over the last

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52 Unless indicated otherwise, all quotes and ideas from Chris Luther within this chapter come from two in-person interviews between him, Joseph Decosimo, and myself from October 20 and November 8, 2014, as well as an in-person interview between him and myself on February 16, 2018.
decade. Luther isn’t completely satisfied with the current state of the *Bridge Bowl*, and it continues to exist in a space between his idea and its tangible expression. He has sold between thirty and forty of its predecessors, but has also scrapped many others. One sits on his mother-in-law’s kitchen table holding African violets, but the most successful *Bridge Bowl* has stood on a shelf in his studio for many years.

In addition to Luther’s positioning of the *Bridge Bowl*—even in its current, most successful form—as a work-in-progress, his progression and play from this work to another, exemplified through the phrase, “how one idea leads to the next,” reflects an interaction between Luther’s individual aesthetic impulse, the practice in which he was trained, the spontaneous qualities of his material, and global ideologies and aesthetics. “How one idea leads to the next” encapsulates his willingness to try new forms and follow the flow of his creativity, but it also extends toward a more fluid understanding of *tradition* in Seagrove and beyond.

![Figure 2.2 - Chris Luther, *Bridge Bowl* (inside detail), ca. 2000-10](image)
Folklorists William Ferris and Glenn Hinson define tradition as “a product of decisions—decisions to hold onto, decisions to pass on, decisions to accept the passing, decisions to sustain.” In this way, practices and processes become traditional when individuals and communities “invest them with importance and then choose to keep them alive.” Moreover, tradition is both a continuous and dynamic process, located in individual actions and influenced by a variety of external and internal factors, as explained by Martha Sims and Martine Stephens in *Living Folklore*:

The concept of *continuity* suggests the importance of time and repetition in tradition, but it is also used to acknowledge that traditions do not always come to us from generations

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54 Hinson and Ferris, “Folklife,” 12.
past… the term continuity refers to threads of meaning and significance that connect traditions with groups. Sharing describes one-to-one teaching and learning of traditions, but also helps us conceptualize transmission within a group, among its members, as well as between groups. It helps us see that tradition doesn’t always move in a “straight line” from past to present, one generation to the next. Tradition incorporates space as well as time.\textsuperscript{55}

Rather than an aesthetic tied to a specific, static moment—an idea of tradition that continues to haunt and flatten its contemporary use—tradition represents a process of both stability, or some point of departure, and change. Tradition, in both the tangible and ideological sense, is simply “how one idea leads to the next.” This definition situates Luther’s work not in conflict with the Seagrove tradition but in dialogue with it. At the same time, it more suitably unflattens and encapsulates all pottery from the region today, and the lived impact of working within a creative community, where ideas, techniques, and aesthetics are continually shared and absorbed.

However, as in other regions of the South, especially those with tourism-based economies such as in parts of Appalachia, repeated emphasis on isolated creativity, deep connectivity to the land, and generational ties to folk practices too often reduces tradition to something that is immobile.\textsuperscript{56} The perception of tradition as historical, unwavering, and visible at only certain potteries is so pervasive within Seagrove, North Carolina that when asked how he

\textsuperscript{55} Sims and Stephens are expanding on Barre Toelken’s definition of tradition as a balance of elements that change (dynamic) and elements that stay the same (conservative). Understanding tradition along this spectrum challenges common associations of “tradition” as old-fashioned and static. Martha Sims and Martine Stephens. Living Folklore: An Introduction to the Study of People and Their Traditions, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011), 65–6.

\textsuperscript{56} As Jane Becker details in Selling Tradition, in the process of modernizing previously isolated communities such as those in Appalachia, educated and well-to-do scholars and developers also hoped to re-create Appalachia as a “crucible of the nation’s past” and maintain the noble values and traditions they perceived to be disappearing with industrialization. Importantly, many urban Americans were convinced that these values and traditions were maintained in the “authentic” music, language, dance, and other arts of these communities. These trends and the resulting tourist market appealing to “authenticity” mirror the transitions in Seagrove and its revitalizing market around the early-twentieth century. Jane Becker, Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930-1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 41-3.
would define the term, Luther automatically turned to a visual explanation of continuity in the historical narrative of Seagrove pottery:

> For Seagrove, what I consider *tradition*, is the utilitarian wares before the Industrial Revolution, and before the Art Pottery. That would be traditional pots. Then there is the whole tradition from the [19]50s to the 70s of the Art Pottery. So you have two separate traditions there. And then you have anything past 1970, where glazes are changing, and you have so many different ways of firing and glazing, so there is not really tradition any more… Clay and heat. Those are about the only connections we have now.

As Luther suggests, there are two distinct formal traditions in Seagrove: one marked by migration to the area; the other by the impact of industrialization and globalization on the rupture of locally sourced and used utilitarian pottery. Both types of wares represent specific historical practices in Seagrove and continue to be made in various forms by a number of contemporary potters in the area. Previous scholarship on Seagrove pottery suggests that “the Seagrove tradition” primarily exists through potters creating either of these two types of works.
Many customers from outside the region come to Seagrove with the intention of leaving with what they perceive to be authentic, traditional Seagrove works. Appealing to customer expectations in every aspect of their product—including the work, narrative, signage, and architecture—is a matter of strategy for many potters. However, the aesthetics and ideas undergirding this advertised historical narrative are not the only, nor the most powerful influences on the way Seagrove potters approach their work. For the dozens of national and international potters who moved there because of the thriving tourist economy that supports them both financially and creatively, situating their work as distinctive from local, historical practices is also tactical. Without family ties to Seagrove, artists carve out other niches to spark visitors’ interests while expressing their individual point of view, but rarely are these artists considered traditional Seagrove potters, even if they contribute immeasurably to Seagrove’s creative culture and development. As Luther suggests, “But the whole thing that makes Seagrove work is that there is such a diversity in what everybody does… If we didn’t have the diversity, I don’t think we’d be here as a community.”

Unwavering understandings of the local and its relationship to tradition in Seagrove continually take precedence over globalism within art and heritage markets, often resulting in flattened, haunted, and reductive representations of traditional artists. To situate Seagrove pottery within a broader global context, I argue that the processes and products of creating and upholding a specific local identity in this part of North Carolina, especially one that is wrapped

57 For example, potters like Daniel Johnston and David Stuempfle test the limits of clay and pottery techniques through the large scale of their works, whereas potters Bruce Gholson and Samantha Henneke of Bulldog Pottery experiment with the iridescent capabilities of glaze.

58 Traditional Arts Indiana defines “traditional artists” as those working and learning within a community to which they belong, whether that community is defined along ethnic, racial, religious, occupational, or other parameters. Importantly, traditional artists work innovatively in the present even if their work is rooted in the past in many ways. “What are traditional arts?” Traditional Arts Indiana, accessed November 17, 2017, http://www.traditionalartsindiana.org/about/what-are-the-traditional-arts/.
up in a persistent and oversimplified understanding of tradition, is itself a process and product of globalization, and in fact, always has been.

**Locating the Local in Global Seagrove, North Carolina**

As the wheel spins, Chris Luther places a small mound of clay in the center and begins to mold it, occasionally applying water from the bucket in front of him to keep the clay loose. He forms it into a round ball and within seconds, raises it into a cylinder using his left fingers to create the hollow interior and his right to thin the walls of the vessel. Using both hands, he cuts into the bottom of the cylinder, creating a pedestal that separates the cup on top from the clay to be reused for another project on the bottom.

“So if you want to be sterile, you’d make it nice and smooth,” Luther explains as he works his rib—a flat, sharp-edged tool—upward, smoothing the outside walls and base of the cup. “But on those (Figures 2.5-2.6), you just take a rib…” Rather than explain the rest of his process in words, he demonstrates the swift up and down carving technique that produces wide, wavy lines on the exterior of the cup. I audibly marvel at the quick transformation of the work. Almost as soon as Luther started, he is already nearly finished. He lifts his foot to stop the spinning wheel, sets the rib to the side, and continues, “to give it that little bit of effect.”

Using the weight of his foot on the pedal to slowly turn the wheel, he uses his right index finger to continue shaping the base of the cup. He stops the wheel again, reaches for a piece of wire to cut the cup from the clay pedestal it stands on, and uses the wheel again to slowly help move the wire through the clay. Picking up the cup with the index and middle finger of both his hands, he remembers and mutters to himself, “[I can’t] forget to get the water out of this.” He lifts it up with his left hand and uses the fingers of his right to hold the cup as he tips it over to
pour out the few drips of water left inside, and adjusts the sides he accidentally distorted while flipping it upside down. He signals the completion of the work when he lifts it to face level and looks at it.

Luther continues his lesson with a slightly tentative disposition: “And the Japanese…” He looks back at us and uses his right hand to replicate the spinning motion of the wheel as he continues, “they… go on little quick wheels or they have a stick and they spin it…” Looking back at the cup, he draws our attention to its exterior using his right hand to imitate the motion of its texture as he continues, “and theirs always comes up perfectly uneven around the rim…” Finding the irony of this statement humorous, I chuckle and echo, “Perfectly uneven.” Grinning at my reaction, he continues, “they get the little… little undulation all the way around.” He sets the cup on the shelf next to him and concludes his lesson: “But that’s how I do that.”

Figure 2.5 - Chris Luther, Japanese-inspired Cups, 2014

Figure 2.6 - Chris Luther, Japanese-inspired Cup (demonstration), 2014
When asked how he achieved the rippled texture of a set of cups in his gallery, it was intuitive for Chris Luther to demonstrate rather than try to explain in words. In the process, he provided a glimpse into the lessons, aesthetics, and ideas he has absorbed over his lifetime of making pottery in Seagrove, North Carolina. Most of them have become internalized and embedded into his practice rather than regularly articulated aloud. Replicating the wavy texture on the exterior of the cup, for example, Luther demonstrated his urge to experiment with outside pottery techniques and aesthetics, and the fluidity with which they enter his artistic process, however tentatively he appears in trying to explain or situate his pottery in line with them.

In his works, practices, and words, Luther reveals the simultaneous influences of his local community in Seagrove and global cultural flows, as well as how they complicate haunted and flattened notions of tradition among a multitude of local subjectivities. At times, Luther proudly asserts his heritage as a fourth-generation Seagrove potter, but he also positions his pottery practice outside of this tradition in deliberate and unmistakable ways. As he navigates both the local art market and the multitude of aesthetics and ideas he has encountered over his lifetime, his work resists expectations of the Seagrove pottery canon without immediately referencing any singular global influence. Like Luther, many potters from the region are quick to bridge their practice with their family ties to Seagrove. Unlike Luther, however, many of them create works visually representative of the historical Seagrove tradition. While Luther’s unique position along the Seagrove pottery continuum tends to be less recognized in discourse on Seagrove pottery, it reveals this community’s positioning between multiple broad, fluid, and interconnected networks extending far beyond its thirteen-mile radius.

Social and cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai presents a critical framework for
understanding the relationship between locality and globalism in Seagrove in his writings on circulation. He proposes that the local and ideas of locality in the most general terms are formed through circulating ideas and temporary negotiations within the context of the global. He describes the local neither as “an inert canvas on which the global was written,” nor a “piece of real estate or even a sensibility.” Instead, Appadurai suggests that the local comes from conscious and creative efforts to “produce locality” from a “menu of circulating global forms” that affect each other and materialize into a temporary and interactive project. This “circulation of forms,” as he calls it, emphasizes the imaginative process of negotiating a local identity from a multitude of global aesthetics, ideologies, and technologies.\(^{59}\)

Residents of Seagrove, North Carolina market their locale as home to one of the largest and longest continuously operating pottery communities in the United States. Within the past and present tourist economies of North Carolina, few places resonate as more deeply and distinctively local than Seagrove, where the artistic community was literally built from and around the rich sources of local clay. Here and elsewhere in and around Randolph County and Moore County, North Carolina, potters of largely English and German descent came to North Carolina through Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia in the mid- to late-eighteenth century.\(^{60}\) A combination of cultural knowledge and geography, including an abundance of fine clays and relative isolation from other communities and their markets, generated an ideal situation for

\(^{59}\) Appadurai’s suggestion that the local is NOT a canvas on which the global is written offers some creative word play in the example of Seagrove pottery, which is predominantly made from locally-sourced clay, and so the local clay does become a blank canvas for global ideas and aesthetics. Arjun Appadurai, “Circulation ≈ Forms” (keynote lecture at the “Loose Canons” Conference, Department of Media, Culture, and Communication, New York University, New York, NY, September 28, 2007), [http://jwtc.org.za/the_salon/volume_2/arjun_appadurai_circulation_forms.htm](http://jwtc.org.za/the_salon/volume_2/arjun_appadurai_circulation_forms.htm).

\(^{60}\) Seagrove was named for Edwin G. Seagraves, a railroad official of English descent responsible for routing a railroad through the area. The town name allegedly resulted from a sign painter’s running out of space, simply dropping the ‘s’ from the end of the name, as well as his incorrect use of ‘o’ instead of ‘a’ in ‘graves’.
autonomous pottery communities to prosper. Their cultural knowledge included a mix of skills necessary for survival, such as farming and preserving food through the production and use of pottery, as well as specific sets of aesthetic ideas and preferences. The self-sufficient lifestyle and economy of the time and region served potters well, as the bulk of their output, including utilitarian wares such as jugs, jars, milk crocks, pitchers, churns, and dishes, was directly associated with necessities such as food preservation, preparation, and consumption.

From the eighteenth century to the present, the local character of Seagrove pottery has always represented negotiations between global ideologies and aesthetics and local resources, yet the European roots of Seagrove pottery appear less important to the oral tradition and history of the community than distinctly local needs and materials. Potters in the region started out producing both plain and decorated lead-glazed redware (Figure 2.7) similar to that produced by

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62 Moravians from Pennsylvania who settled primarily in and around Winston-Salem, North Carolina were the most dominant craftspeople in the region around this time. They were especially known for the quality and scope of their workmanship in slip-decorated earthenware, which combined English and German aesthetics. Before moving to the Piedmont, Moravian potters of largely German decent were already experimenting with English ceramic styles they encountered in Pennsylvania. Much of their output closely resembled earthenware from a prominent ceramic center in Staffordshire, England, especially in their use of slip cups with multiple spouts to create parallel wavy lines on the surfaces of decorated pie plates. Their combination with German medieval and baroque decorative motifs further elevated their status within American pottery traditions at the time. Moravian potters in North Carolina similarly continued to embellish their ceramics with traditional Pennsylvania-German motifs such as tulips and other floral decorations. In contrast to their northern contemporaries, however, they were more inclined toward abstract lines and designs than human and animal figural representations or literary motifs, and also used richer, more varied tones of colored glazes. Overall, these highly decorated and colorful wares, in addition to the pottery techniques and rigidly controlled craft and trade economy, differed significantly from those of other Piedmont farmer-potters outside Winston-Salem. John Bivins, Jr., *The Moravian Potters in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: Published for Old Salem, Inc. by University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 215-7; Charles Zug III, *Turners and Burners: The Folk Potters of North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 4-5, 10.

their English-inspired Moravian contemporaries in and around Winston-Salem, North Carolina.  

By the early-nineteenth century, however, they began producing higher-fired salt-glazed stoneware (Figure 2.8) almost exclusively for a number of potential reasons. Not only was salt-glaze less toxic than lead, but also the clay used for stoneware was ultimately less labor-intensive. Made from gray clay buried deep in nearby creek beds, it required less work compared to cleaning out the high amounts of sticks, rocks, and other debris found in the red surface clay.

Mary Farrell of Westmore Pottery in Seagrove is one of the only potters in the region producing these early English and German-inspired redwares today.

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64 Mary Farrell of Westmore Pottery in Seagrove is one of the only potters in the region producing these early English and German-inspired redwares today.
These early salt-glazed wares were decorated very little, in part due to the need for quick production, but also because of the resulting visual interest and effects of adding salt during the firing process. Salt-glazed stoneware was dominant in parts of England at the time, but these global intersections with local resources and necessities gradually became distinct markers of the
Seagrove pottery tradition as definitively local, even in the present.\footnote{Appadurai also proposes that these forms and the product of locality are not always freely chosen by all actors in a particular site, which is important because it leaves the location of agency much more open. While he suggests that it is a “conscious effort,” I add to this that the effort can come in varying degrees from outsiders and insiders to any given locality, and is also affected by the various unconscious forces that are also at work—a theory about non-human agency put forth by New Materialist scholars such as Jane Bennett. Appadurai, “Circulation ≈ Forms”; Eddy Faber and Pamela Wood, “Production strategies in the Nottingham salt-glazed stoneware industry,” University of Nottingham Department of Archaeology, accessed November 16, 2017, http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/current/strategies-stoneware.aspx; “A Brief History,” Discover Seagrove, accessed November 16, 2017, https://discourseagrove.com/about; Zug, Turners and Burners, 27; Charlotte Vestal Brown, The Remarkable Potters of Seagrove: The Folk Pottery of a Legendary North Carolina Community (New York: Lark Books, 2006), 16-7.} Chris Luther’s Bridge Bowl represents one tangible expression of negotiations between the global and the local and their continual evolution in Seagrove.

\*Chris Luther’s Local Beginnings\*

As an idea and experiment, the Bridge Bowl has stuck with Chris Luther over several years. As a container of history and lived experience, it retains the knowledge of images and traditions that Luther has absorbed over his lifetime. In the process, it connects Seagrove pottery traditions to global aesthetic ideas. While its conceptual process reveals the dynamism and invention of Luther’s practice, the physical process of creating the Bridge Bowl reflects continuity of the historical tradition in which he was trained.

As a child, Luther accompanied his mother and grandmother on visits to potteries in the Seagrove area. He recalls playing with clay as a five year old, and seeing expert potters turn pot after pot: “I spent the first twenty years of my life knowing pottery, but never really being part of it.” Luther began throwing pottery after finishing his bachelor’s degrees in psychology and business at Appalachian State University in the early 1990s. Unsure of his next life steps, he returned home to find a pottery studio set up by his mother in their basement. He tried the pottery
wheel after two weeks of her encouragement, and has been “addicted ever since.” Talking about this lineage and his immediate enchantment with pottery after just one night of working the wheel, Luther expressed: “They say it’s in your blood.” Both Luther’s grandfather and great-grandfather were potters in the area; in the backroom of his studio, his own works stand alongside those crafted by his relatives and mentors. His great-grandfather, W. H. Crisco, was particularly prominent as one of the first salt-glaze potters in the region. Crisco began working for J. D. Craven at the age of thirteen, and made his living crafting salt-glazed utilitarian wares. In 1969, his shop was dismantled and stored at the Smithsonian Institution, but Luther’s studio and house stand only about a mile and a half from where his great-grandfather’s shop once stood.

Following his initial experimentation at the pottery wheel, Luther joined his mother in classes taught at Randolph Community College in Asheboro, North Carolina, where he found mentors in former production potters Bob Armfield and Archie Teague. Luther explains, “I garnered so much information from those two men in such a short period of time… just little things that resonate still… like, ‘You can move more clay with one finger than you can with your whole hand.’… Experience that you work a lifetime to achieve.” Bob Armfield, who makes pottery in Seagrove today, took Luther on as an assistant, and taught him many of the skills and tips he continues to utilize. Drawing from years of experience throwing clay as a production potter and the need to not waste resources, Armfield passed on a preference for throwing thin clay to Luther: “Bob always told me… ‘Throw till you can read a newspaper through it. And then you can back off.’ … So when I first started, I threw paper-thin almost—really too thin for anything functional… I’ve found a balance now.”

While under Armfield’s wing, Luther met the production potter Archie Teague, who taught him undercutting, a technique that brings out what he calls, “the magic of the shape.” By
cutting away at an angle toward the base of a pot, Teague molded Luther’s preference for works that are “light and airy, instead of earthbound.” Undercutting is subtlety visible in all of Luther’s works because, as he explains, “That’s just one of those things that if it just goes straight down it doesn’t look right to me.” Although his pottery differs significantly from the utilitarian works of his early mentors, their aesthetic preferences resonate within his working knowledge of clay—evident in the thin walls of the Bridge Bowl and its appearance of floating. In addition to his residency in Seagrove and family background, the influences of Luther’s mentors further connect him to the local pottery tradition and its history.

Figure 2.9 - W. H. Crisco, Jar, ca. 1900

The ease with which Luther shares stories and knowledge about the region and his family’s pottery roots also suggests the weight of this heritage within his art practice. Discussing a pot in his shop made around 1900 by his great-grandfather (Figure 2.9), Luther recalled the
traditional processes of digging, milling, turning, and firing clay in Seagrove: “You can tell the Mitchfield clay—the little spots and colors… I’ve got a pile of white clay out there. It came from the other side of Seagrove, where they used to dig a lot. But this is pretty indigenous… Pretty much raw clay out of the ground. They dig it, they put it in the pug mill and mix it up.” He pointed out the distinctive beige spots and holes in his great-grandfather’s pot, which tell the history of Seagrove potters’ deep ties to the land and early use of imperfect surface clay: “See that little hole? That was a root that burned. You can see the places of either feldspar or—that’s a piece of white flint rock. So they didn’t clean their clay very much at all.” Looking at the surface of the pot a little closer, he recalled, “There were stories of my uncles running through the shop with a bean-shooter. And shooting holes into pots. And their grandfather would just patch the holes and go on. So I think those two are patched spots, best I can tell.”

Looking at a later example of his great-grandfather’s works, which was given to Luther by a woman from Asheboro (Figure 2.10), he reflects on hastier methods of potters from Crisco’s generation, and their reduced attention to detail: “See, they didn’t take a lot of time. They just smeared their handles in and went on… Just sliced it off the wheel, set it aside, smoothed it over around just a little bit and that was that.” As he looked closer at the work, he pointed out fingerprints where Crisco picked the pot off the wheel. Luther’s memory and knowledge of his great-grandfather’s practice expresses a deep connection to this history, but he continually differentiates his own practice from that of previous generations of potters, in part through his attention to detail, artistry, and creative mobility:

You know, in the older forms, everybody was more focused on production and function, whereas I don’t have to worry about getting out so many pieces, and I can be more creative. I think the creativity part is what turns it into art more. Although, even the old production potters came up with new ideas and they were creative in their own way… a lot more limited kind of scope, but they had to be creative in the way they solved problems to make it functional. There was art to what they were doing. It was not just
over and over and over the same thing, even though it was over and over and over the same thing. But I do think that what makes a difference between art and craft is the fact that I am able to be creative and stretch my bounds and evolve as a potter. After so many years, you get tired… you have to do something different.

Luther attributes differences between his work and that of his great-grandfather’s generation to changes in economics and necessity. His own practice, which is not his primary source of income, responds to a different need—one of aesthetic preference and personal taste:

But what my great-grandfather did was completely different from what I do, and he didn’t think about any way but making a dollar. And he made a nickel a gallon for his wares at the highest he ever earned… But it was before the Industrial Revolution so everybody needed it—you know, there weren’t that many metal or glasswares available… There’s just not that need any longer, so now it’s a luxury good, and I have to cater to what people want to decorate with.

The potential for sales is a determining factor in some of what Luther makes, but works like the Bridge Bowl are created more out of a place of creative exploration and enjoyment rather than
income. As Luther suggests, however, there was a distinct moment in Seagrove’s history after
the Industrial Revolution in which pottery became an object of luxury rather than necessity. With
this shift came changes in aesthetic interests and standards, many of which were inspired by
global ceramics and are still evident in the work of contemporary Seagrove potters.

Seagrove in the Twentieth Century: The Jugtown Aesthetic

By the twentieth century, the increased transparency of globalization and
industrialization’s influences on pottery signified a new face of global aesthetics in rural
southern communities. The market for utilitarian wares once supporting potters and their families
were threatened by the manufacturing of cheaper materials for food storage, including glass and
metal, while growth in technology, transportation, and leisure spurred the development of a new
tourist market through increased traffic to Seagrove, the transportation of potters’ works to urban
centers such as New York City, and the increased availability of new materials and aesthetic
influences for use by potters. To ensure the survival of their practice, Seagrove potters expanded
their repertoire to include these newer forms and glazes.66

One aspect of the early-twentieth-century shift toward a market driven economy and
accompanying expansion of aesthetics in Seagrove products was the close proximity of new
resort communities such as Pinehurst, North Carolina. As part of a renewed national interest in
collecting American folk art after World War I, many white, well-to-do guests visiting Pinehurst

66 Denny Hubbard Mecham, The Living Tradition: North Carolina Potters Speak (Conover, NC:
Published for the North Carolina Pottery Center by Goosepen Studio & Press, 2009), xiii-xiv; Robert C.
Lock, The Traditional Potters of Seagrove, North Carolina: And Surrounding Areas from the 1800s to the
Resort were interested in what they perceived as “authentic” and distinctly regional folk crafts. They had little use for large milk crocks or churns, so potters reduced the size of their traditional wares to serve more decorative or occasional serving functions. For example, jars once ranging in size from one quart to ten gallons or more were compressed into smaller pill or sugar jars, and miniature jugs became top-sellers to tourists, likely because of their popular local association with moonshine and bootleggers (Figures 2.11-2.12). Regardless of their size, this aesthetic link to a local or regional past—maintained through some gesture toward utility and function—remained a fundamental thread in how tradition was and continues to be defined in Seagrove.

While some affluent Pinehurst tourists would commission Seagrove potters to make works similar to the ceramic forms they encountered in their travels abroad, potters also began to recognize the types of global works that tourists would find appealing. One example of this is the local tradition of making Rebecca pitchers (Figure 2.13), which were inspired by Grecian-like vessels such as those in biblical illustrations of Rebecca at the well; these have been made in

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67 As Wanda Corn discusses in *The Great American Thing*, within the political and cultural climate of the interwar period, many American intellectuals, historians, artists, curators, art dealers, and politicians became preoccupied with the idea of “cultural nationalism” and sought to connect America’s national identity with its material culture. Within one generation, a body of artwork called “folk art,” which previously had little market value or significance, was tracked down, collected, researched, sold, and displayed in museums and galleries across the United States. This history parallels similar interests in southern folk crafts, especially in places like Appalachia, as Jane Becker discussed. Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 318-21.


69 In her ruminations on the miniature, gigantic, souvenir, and collection, Susan Stewart describes “the miniature” as a form of cultural production, and using the example of a toy, she describes the miniature as a device for fantasy and point of departure for narrative. The creating of miniatures based on historical pottery forms in Seagrove similarly connects collectors to a fantasy of a past world—reifying both the fantasy and their relationship to it. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives on the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 55-7; Zug, *The Traditional Pottery of North Carolina*, 41-3.
Seagrove since the 1920s. A number of other factors also influenced potters’ work and intensified their attention to new, global artistic forms; moreover, these global pottery styles quickly became embedded into perceptions of the local tradition.

Previous scholarship suggests that the most significant factor in bringing global aesthetics to Seagrove was the involvement of Jacques and Juliana Busbee, who opened Jugtown Pottery in 1921. In her 1968 brief history, Jean Crawford characteristically described Jugtown as “more than a pottery. It is a place, a way of life, a story of adventure.” Originally from the Raleigh area of North Carolina, the Busbees began working with farmer-potters from Moore County still making the traditional wares they admired; after finding them too unwilling to adapt to new ideas, however, they began employing younger potters who were, according to Jacques, “more

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Figure 2.13 - Charles C. Cole, *Rebecca Pitcher*, ca. 1938-67
(Photo source: mintmuseum.org)
Figure 2.14 - Jugtown Pottery, Vase, ca. 1925-35
(Photo source: mintmuseum.org)

Figure 2.15 - Benjamin Wade Owen, Pair of Candleholders, ca. 1960-65
(Photo source: mintmuseum.org)

Figure 2.16 - Benjamin Wade Owen, Egg Nog Bowl with Six Cups, ca. 1940-60
(Photo source: mintmuseum.org)
plastic.” They hired seventeen-year-old Ben Owen, who became the primary potter associated with Jugtown for over twenty years and remained one of the most important potters from the region long after.72

The earliest pottery created at Jugtown resembled not only the utilitarian works made over one hundred years before Jugtown’s opening, such as jugs, crocks, and jars, but also those more indicative of the tourist market, including pie plates, cups, saucers, plates, cream and sugar dishes, candlesticks, and tea sets (Figures 2.14-2.16). While in Seagrove, Jacques Busbee studied traditional North Carolina pottery designs, and helped Ben Owen develop new ideas and improve previously simple designs. Their works were less desirable in North Carolina at the time, but had a strong market in New York, where Juliana Busbee opened the Village Store in Greenwich Village and sold North Carolina pottery for several years. As Jugtown works brought greater demand in North Carolina, the Busbees closed the Greenwich location to return to Seagrove fulltime.

In addition to the pottery itself, both the colorful personalities of the Busbees and the atmospheric quality of Jugtown attracted people from all over the country, of whom many went out of their way to visit the remote log cabins and “rustic, unpretentious environment” in Seagrove:

The log cabin where the Busbees lived (Figures 2.17) was memorable for its charming mixture of hand-hewn tables, split-bottom chairs, wild flowers in handwoven baskets, the music from operas, newspapers from New York and London, the autographed books and drawings. A pot of beans was always on the open fire, where meals of roast pheasant, corn pone, ‘simmon pudding, and rabbit or squirrel stew were prepared.73

Juliana additionally played up the rustic atmosphere of her log cabin by rejecting modern conveniences, and as Crawford describes, “The house reflected the Busbees’ interests and was an appropriate setting for the craft movement which they were promoting.” In the curating of their home and the Jugtown site, the Busbees crafted a perception of themselves and of the Seagrove tradition. Opera music, newspapers from cities around the world, and autographed books and drawings characterized them as progressive and worldly connoisseurs of art, music, and literature. The design of their log cabin home, with its collection of handmade goods, furniture decorated with wild flowers, lack of modern appliances, and seemingly endless food prepared

74 Crawford, Jugtown Pottery, 21-2.
with local ingredients simultaneously reified the importance of local resources, ideologies, and aesthetics alongside global culture. Just as their home combined local and global aesthetics and resources, so too Jugtown Pottery became the center of a new kind of globalization that had a rippling effect elsewhere in Seagrove. In their representation of a newly revived local tradition more appealing to tourists and other visitors to the region, the Busbees still retained the romance and nostalgia of the old.

Figure 2.18 - Benjamin Wade Owen, *Han Vase*, ca. 1937 (Photo source: mintmuseum.org)
Early on, Jacques Busbee recognized similarities between techniques of farmer-potters in Seagrove and potters from China and Korea. He began to look eastward for new shapes, such as vases, bowls, and jars from the Chinese Han, Tang, and Sung periods, and began visiting museums and libraries in New York to study ceramics from around the world. Ben Owen accompanied him on at least one trip and experimented with the works that he saw there for the rest of his career (Figure 2.18).\(^{75}\) Jacques also tried new glazes, creating shades such as Chinese blue, Frogskin green, and Tobacco spit—all of which remain principal local glazes in the Seagrove potter’s repertoire to this day. After Jacques’ death in 1947, lawsuits over the signing of deeds to two separate corporations led to the temporary closing of Jugtown from 1959 to 1960. Ben Owen subsequently opened his own pottery several miles away, and continued to make works sought by people from across the country.\(^{76}\)

Vernon Owens, a distant relative of Ben Owen, was one of a few potters who began working at Jugtown after Juliana Busbee’s death in 1962. He and his wife, Pamela Owens, along with their two children, Travis and Bayle, and Vernon’s brother, Bobby, are the present owners and potters at Jugtown. A 2009 short documentary on Jugtown Pottery for the PBS series *Craft in America* illuminates the ongoing role of the place and location itself in providing an experience beyond just the story that is told, additionally noting the decline of these kinds of places in general to emphasize why Jugtown is unique. Throughout each of the narratives in this nine-minute video segment, accompanied by footage of the property at Jugtown and the potters’ construction and glazing of works, there are common threads between Jugtown’s history and the Seagrove narrative that is told elsewhere. Aspects of the natural and built environment


affectively appeal to outsiders. They are not only selling individual works, but also an experience of this place and a means of connecting to its history—not unlike other tourist locations outside of the North Carolina Piedmont.

In the opening sequence of the documentary, Travis discusses his early inclination for pottery practice as a natural progression following his parents’ practice. The film shows photos of him as a small child at the wheel. He also discusses the sensation of holding works from the area that date back one hundred and fifty years. Narrating the labor of his ancestors’ work, including digging the clay, turning on a kick wheel, and cutting wood for the kiln, he ponders, “Sometimes I pick up those works and I wonder how they did it.”

In providing a framework for the history of pottery in Seagrove, Vernon discusses the earliest kilns found in the area, and aligns the groundhog kiln that they fire with those used in the area as early as 1850. He explains his upbringing and his parents’ making of pottery for a living with “nothing magical about it,” and details early ways of learning by watching and working with older, more experienced potters in the family. Pamela, who originally hails from New England, describes what drew her to the region and her personal connection to the historic, utilitarian works. Similarly, Nancy Sweezy, director of Jugtown Pottery from 1968 to 1982, discusses her own experiences visiting Jugtown for the first time, and the log buildings and wooded area that immediately attracted her. Describing herself as the “stranger from the North” and “damn Yankee,” she details her early business dealings with Vernon and Bobby Owens and memories of Jugtown over the years.77

It’s important to note that both the filmmakers and the Owens’ are engaged in a familiar kind of narrative construction throughout the documentary. Jugtown’s history is distinctive and

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significant to the Seagrove community as a whole, but it is just one example of the local
narrative permeating throughout Seagrove. What they describe echoes what one hears from all
corners of the community, from potters and visitors to pamphlets, books, and signs. Younger
potters or those from outside the region describe this place and the pottery tradition and history
with awe, while many of the older and more experienced potters play down the wonder and
artfulness of their practice. Most, however, emphasize local materials, styles, and multi-
generational connections among pottery families as central components of the local tradition.

Part of what they are selling in this documentary is also Jugtown’s roots in the “Busbee
aesthetic”: the combination of “simple” North Carolina and Korean, Chinese, and Japanese
pottery. This important juncture from the early utilitarian works is almost never left out of the
Seagrove history narrative, despite continued emphasis on the local. By the 1950s, the
combination of these global influences, the increasing tourist market, and the diminishing
necessity of large, utilitarian wares solidified the turn toward decorative and smaller serving
wares in Seagrove. The appearance of candlesticks, creamers, cups, and mugs, along with vases
and other containers adopting elements of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and other global wares
signified what came to be known as the Art Pottery tradition in Seagrove. At this point, the
combination of economic necessity and Art Pottery’s broader creative possibilities influenced
most Seagrove potters’ output for several decades. Even within this long history of expansion
and looking outward for aesthetic inspiration, the singular emphasis on either the early utilitarian
wares or the Art Pottery continues to haunt and flatten perceptions of tradition in Seagrove
today. 78

78 Brown, The Remarkable Potters of Seagrove, 35; Mark Hewitt, The Potter’s Eye: Art and Tradition in
North Carolina Pottery (Chapel Hill: Published for the North Carolina Museum of Art by University of
Global/Local Circulations in Contemporary Seagrove

Seagrove pottery continues to grow as established potters take on apprentices and pass on their knowledge and love of pottery to their children or others in the community. Many produce work aesthetically linked to older pottery traditions; even more use indigenous clay and local salt-glaze recipes, while firing with cross-draft wood kilns. Following the early development of Art Pottery in the mid-twentieth century, consumer trends and global influences make it difficult to discern precise influences on Seagrove pottery as a whole, or any single, distinct pottery tradition aside from the older utilitarian wares and Art Pottery that many still make today. The same could be said around other place-based artistic communities, and this is largely a result of increasing globalization and its newer, more complex networks and other forms of circulation and connectivity.

Over one hundred potters in the Seagrove area today interpret traditional, contemporary, and global aesthetics and ideas in endlessly varied ways. Many potters and visitors familiar with the wide range of pottery in Seagrove celebrate this new level of diversity, yet the historical narrative and its distinctly local pottery tradition continues to uphold a kind of canon. While creative communities like Seagrove are more outwardly and explicitly grappling with and drawing from the world of ideas and aesthetics outside their once presumably homogenous locations, anxieties concerning these changes have also energized the preservation of this heritage at both an individual and communal level. These efforts are vital to documenting history and culture, but by overlooking the past and present impact of globalization on potters and other artists who fall outside their flattened parameters of local and traditional, too many of these artists don’t receive the fiscal, scholarly, or other public attention they deserve, especially in light of more nuanced understandings of tradition and its many manifestations today.
Luther’s interactions with potters at local, community gatherings suggest the importance of maintaining a local identity, but they also exemplify the fluidity of tradition, even in seemingly insular settings. Getting together at workshops, kiln firings, and even rarer moments around a neighbor’s workspace solidifies relationships and reifies some sense of group homogeneity, while the interaction of techniques and conversation within these shared moments opens up space for critique, development of new ideas, and creative and collective engagement with the world of influences outside of Seagrove. As Luther describes:

Wood kilns are the perfect time for talking shop, and we do. But it’s tough to get away and spend time otherwise. Ben Owen (III) has this huge wood kiln so it takes an army to load it and fire it… Usually you do two people shifts, and it’s 24/7. We’ll have several meals together—that’s a good time to talk shop. You get a little punchy at three AM, but it’s still good to share ideas.

Referencing topics of conversation at these gatherings, he continued:

A little bit of everything. We talk about other people’s pottery from around. You know, “I saw so and so…” I had a commission for the North Hills Marriott in Raleigh when my shop burned. Anyway, Ben was gracious enough to take me and say, “Hey, do it over here.” That helped me a lot. We were working evenings together. “This is how I do it,” and “this is how I do it.” And you’d throw a plate. It’s a lot of fun to work with people doing the same thing. You get in your daily routine, your little hermit cave, and don’t see anybody. It’s nice. That’s why I enjoyed workshops. I got into shino glazes, and Malcolm Davis was the shino king, so I went to Asheville and did a weeklong workshop with him and got to know him. Potters come from everywhere... There’s all kinds of interesting people out there that make pottery. So many different ideas. So many ways you can do things.

In addition to these places of learning or working together, many Seagrove potters similarly come together around shared events such as festivals or pottery shows at least once a year, displaying their simultaneous sense of group identity and individuality to outsiders.

Over the last few decades, globalization has taken many more new forms in Seagrove, and the tradition has been fundamentally and discernibly altered by the more recent influx of influences coming to the region through a number of ways. While the historical local and the
contemporary local are both products and processes of globalization, the most contemporary means by which ideas and aesthetics can be shared through networks and other circulations is unprecedented. New potters from a wide variety of cultural and educational backgrounds have settled in Seagrove or visited the area for workshops and conferences. Perhaps most importantly, potters and other artists have even easier and more expansive access than ever to photos, videos, and information about pottery and other art forms from around the world, especially via the Internet.

Luther openly references the multiple “bits and pieces” of local and outsider sources of inspiration for his works, but much of his development as an artist reflects more of a subconscious and nonlinear movement from idea to idea:

I get a little bit locally. I mean you see a little bit on people’s pots, but when you go outside of the area, there’s a lot of people doing a lot of really outlandish stuff. So I draw inspiration from all kinds of people. And you see something and a year or two later or ten years later, it comes out in your pots and you say, “Where did that come from?” But it’s an idea that had been rolling around for years and years and you remember… It just becomes acclimated into your work, and not necessarily a conscious decision, but it’s one that came through evolution.

Luther happily admits that he learns things from novice potters as well, largely because of their lack of preconceived notions of what will turn out and their willingness to experiment.

While some ideas come to Luther without a conscious thread to their origins, he recalls

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79 Appadurai considers the reasons for our particularly globalized moment, citing examples such as global financial markets and more sophisticated tools for storing, sharing, and tracking information. He suggests the ways they have altered the frameworks through which one presently understands oneself and others. Accessibility to cultural worlds outside of one’s own is expanding at a much speedier pace than in previous decades, even going so far as to confound older models of acculturation and cultural contact because the networks connecting people and content also provide new materials and means for constructing an idea of oneself. Appadurai states, “In short, global cultural flows have lost the selective and cumbersome qualities that they have had for much of human history, in which most societies found ways to accommodate external systems of meaning within their own cosmological frameworks, producing change by dialectic accident and structural accommodation.” He continues, “Today, global cultural flows, be they religious, political or market-centered, have entered into the very manufacture of local subjectivities, thus changing both the machineries for the manufacture of local meaning and the materials that are processed by these machineries.” Appadurai, “Circulation ∼ Forms.”
his early exposure to Asian ceramics through guest potters invited to their annual pottery conference. When asked about these influences in greater detail, Luther located aesthetic ideas in the details of his works, rather than specific geographic origins:

A lot of the Asian functional stuff is footed. If you can see those tumblers out there, the little handle-less type mug (Figure 2.5)—you’ve got a sharp angle coming down to the foot and it just kind of clearly defines what’s above and what’s below, and it’s hard to explain, but it’s pleasing to me to have that definition for whatever reason… The long neck bottles (Figure 2.19) go back centuries to—they used to call them crane neck bottles. That’s another one of those ideas that I pull from Asian art.

In other cases, Luther recalls in detail specific memories of workshops he attended, the things he learned, and the techniques or stylistic ideas he would like to try one day. Remembering a workshop in which Ongii potter Mr. Oh and his helpers demonstrated throwing and drying large jars with a traditional Korean kick wheel and coal heater, Luther discussed the multitude of
ideas, variations, and combinations of throwing, glazing, and firing: “there’s just way more ideas than there ever is time.”

Japanese Mingei pottery is a particularly strong influence on Luther’s work, though it is one with which he is both familiar and slightly uncomfortable:

You know, mingei is a little bit too extreme for me, but I do like the fact that not everything has to be perfect, and what it is is. I saw a video—a visiting Japanese artist came and he was showing this huge dragon kiln and the guys were picking up two or three pots at a time, and I mean, these were big works. And they would pick up one, and put it under their arm and grab another, and just drag it out of the kiln. And everybody was like, “Oh, doesn’t that scratch the pot?!” And he was like, “Mingei…” It’s just a philosophy more than anything—Nature, what is is type thought process… Scratches don’t matter. It’s what it is, part of the process. But when you use something—if you pick up a piece of bone china that has been pressed out the same over and over and over, it’s the same every time you pick it up, but with something imperfect, you have a different tactile experience when you pick it up, have a different tactile experience every time you put it to your lips. That’s why the imperfect is perfect. It gives you something different each time you use it.

Pottery from the Japanese Mingei Movement parallels the creation of and influences on Seagrove Art Pottery between the 1920s and 30s, though the two movements develop somewhat in opposition. Closely shadowing the ideological foundations of the British Arts and Crafts Movement, Mingei responded to the burgeoning modernization and internationalization of Japanese culture in the early-twentieth century, and represented the revitalization of Japanese folk crafts. At the same time, industrialization and globalization caused Seagrove potters to shift their focus outward to places such as China, Japan, and Korea.80

The philosophical and aesthetic principles of the Japanese Mingei Movement, developed in the 1920s and 30s but continuing in various forms today, come from the written work of Yanagi Sōetsu, who initially defined mingei not as mindset or aesthetic, but as a category: folk craft. Yanagi was heavily influenced by the ideas of William Morris, the main force behind the

Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain. Morris believed that the laws of nature were the laws of art, and where nature worked, there would be beauty. Before Morris, the British movement was also rooted in the writings of both Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin. In response to the Industrial Revolution, Carlyle mourned the mechanized management of the physical, internal, and spiritual body, and the lack of spontaneity of individual, natural methods of object making. Likewise, Ruskin emphasized the organic interrelation of art and society in his unhappiness with the strict and precise accuracy of tools brought about by production, which he argued were not natural to man.\(^{81}\)

Morris, Carlyle, and Ruskin’s emphasis on nature, individuality, and spontaneity are one of the many correlations between the Arts and Crafts and Mingei Movements. Yanagi’s belief that art should be made by and for the common man initially led him to call this type of work “people’s art.” He eventually settled on mingei, which derived from the combination of Japanese words for “common people” and “craft.” His emphasis on craft, rather than art was a conscious decision to distance it from what he perceived to be elite “high” art, which as history had revealed, could only be appreciated by educated high society connoisseurs. Beyond the direct translation of mingei to folk craft and application to objects that Yanagi considered functional, unpretentious, pure, simple, and marked by tradition, rather than individuality, the term itself has become more of a philosophical, religious, and aesthetic idea.\(^{82}\) His emphasis on community and loss of the individual craftsperson seems somewhat contradictory to the importance of individual spontaneity suggested by British writers, but Yanagi saw individualism and a sense of “being different” as qualities of elitist, high art, and thus characteristics that would drive up the price of


\(^{82}\) Moeran, *Folk Art Potters of Japan*, 25-6.
the works and make them less accessible to the lower and middle classes.\textsuperscript{83} Regardless, one of the most important qualities of \textit{mingei}, according to Yanagi, was the emphasis on nature, in terms of both the environment—the use of natural, local materials—and the inner self, or relationship to God. If the craftsperson let nature work through them as they created, they would accomplish a type of freedom from the self and higher state of reality.\textsuperscript{84}

While \textit{mingei}’s emphasis on nature is a mindset and stylistic impulse that Luther thinks about and tries to emulate in some of his works, he expresses difficulty in balancing the poles of \textit{mingei} with his Seagrove-based training: “My style on the wheel is a little bit too tight… and I can’t loosen up… it’s hard to be—to go from one extreme to the other. It’s hard to consciously be looser in what I do.” When asked to clarify his distinctions between “tightness” and “looseness,” he explained in words as he demonstrated on the wheel:

Do you see how uniform this is at the top? That’s from years of practice, centering the clay. Let me give you a physical representation of “loose.” Or at least I’ll try. And the reason this comes about is, they didn’t have electric wheels years and years ago, but instead of taking the time to perfectly center this, you can work with clay not being centered… They kind of work with the wheel because the wheel speeds up and slows down as you’re going, but you can see that it’s got movement as you’re working with it. And I’m kind of forcing it back in where I shouldn’t. I should be going with it a little bit more… The whole rim, it will just kind of clean up and leave the undulations… and so that’s even too tight for what they do, because you can even look at the rims on some of these little tea bowls and things, and theirs has this nice little [undulations]… all the way around. It’s fairly uniform, but it’s the hand of the maker. And I just don’t have that.

Attempting again on another cup, he continued:

You know there’s a certain looseness that happens with that, and even the bottom has character that it didn’t. And see something like that could be very aesthetically pleasing to people, and then other people that are really OCD look at it and say, “I can’t stand it.” And they want to straighten it. I’m not OCD, don’t get me wrong. I turn tight because I was taught to make sure that you center and re-center.

\textsuperscript{83} Moeran, \textit{Folk Art Potters of Japan}, 33-6.

\textsuperscript{84} Moeran, \textit{Folk Art Potters of Japan}, 32.
Luther’s description of the ideology and practice of *mingei* as “a little bit too extreme” and his difficulties managing the “looseness” of *mingei* with his generally “tight” process indicates a degree of uncertainty, but the fluidity between Luther’s explanations of *mingei*, family ties to pottery, the influences of his mentors, and his memories from gatherings of local and global potters reveals his multivalent artistic voice and relationship to multiple creative and ideological communities. Rather than diminish the prevalence of locality to his work, it necessarily complicates and unflattens understandings of tradition and emphasizes the role of globalization in Seagrove and beyond. Because of access to local, regional, national, and global circulations of forms and ideas, networks of inspiration often extend far beyond one’s immediate community.

![Figure 2.20 - Shōji Hamada, Thrown, Combed Tea Bowl](Photo source: Wikimedia Commons)
Mingei’s manifestation in Luther’s work is more ideological than physical in the *Bridge Bowl*, though there are similarities between the bumpy, pitted surface quality and earth tone glazes of the *Bridge Bowl* and those of works by Shōji Hamada and other prominent mingei potters (Figure 2.20). Without looking like a direct translation of a Seagrove or mingei pot, or even some combination of the two, the *Bridge Bowl* nevertheless exemplifies contemporary relationships between the local and global. Luther’s decision to draw from influences outside of Seagrove and its historical narrative reflects a willful impulse to differentiate himself from others in his immediate community: “My decision to do more contemporary stuff was just because I get bored and I wanted to do something besides what I’ve seen for the last fifty years. And if you can’t be creative as an artist then what is the use in doing it? There’s a lot of ways to make a whole lot more money than throwing clay on the wheel.” Luther’s distinction between his practice and that of other Seagrove potters reflects the ubiquitous perception of tradition in Seagrove as historical rather than contemporary, and in his words, as “sterile” or “tight” rather than “loose.” Luther’s repeated assertions that he is “not designed for production” suggests a rejection of the historical Seagrove tradition that is similarly evident in the works he makes, but the embodied influence of his mentors, family heritage, and his continued presence within the community also suggests the decision to sustain it.

If Luther’s *Bridge Bowl* is a product of aesthetic and ideological influences from local and global pottery traditions, then its function as a bridge between these communities is an obvious metaphor. On one side sits Seagrove and its history and traditions, including Luther’s family background, training, and memories of growing up in the area and learning to turn pots. On the other side sits the world of ideas outside of Seagrove—memories of pottery workshops with traditional Korean potter Mr. Oh, images of Chinese crane neck bottles, the philosophies of
mingei, and other memories, imagery, and ideologies he has encountered and absorbed both consciously and unconsciously. One example of this psychic intake of global images is the Bridge Bowl’s likeness to high-arched bridges found in Japanese-style gardens and depicted in Japanese visual culture (Figure 2.21). Whether or not this was Luther’s intention, the combination of his knowledge of Japanese art and my own visual vocabulary and association between the two reflects the capacity of our minds to create meaning from what we have previously seen or experienced—a force that carries even greater weight with increasing access to images and ideas from around the planet. The Bridge Bowl powerfully connects numerous places and ideas—by Luther, myself, or others who have seen it or any of its predecessors.
The Bridge Bowl touches the ground at only two small points, and the negative space between these encapsulates the ephemeral relationship between tradition, community, and identity—that which flows under the arch. Just as the bridge-ness of the Bridge Bowl enables fluidity and movement from both sides and a parsing of ideas and images that continually flow underneath, identifying as a Seagrove potter or otherwise does not anchor an artist to any one community or region. The Bridge Bowl engages iconic, local material culture traditions—including the history of pottery built from the clay of this region, used on self-sufficient farms, and ultimately transformed with industrialization—but it also compels beyond the iconic, idyllic, and pastoral, and brings us face to face with the complexities of tradition, community, and identity: how a potter maintains a generational tie to this region even as some of his greatest creative influences come from Asia, how an object encapsulates the history and culture of a region yet looks nothing like an object associated with that place, or how a community of over one hundred potters from all corners of the country and globe continues to emphasize, above all else, the narrative of the historical, local tradition.

Conclusion

While further complexities of heritage production in and around artistic communities such as Seagrove surpass the parameters of this project, the preservation of locality and flattened historical narratives similarly mirrors the construction of the local elsewhere, and with it, the desire for a neat historical thread despite cultural ideas and aesthetics accompanying immigration and rapid globalization. This chapter synthesized Seagrove’s long global history and detailed Chris Luther’s pottery practice as emblematic of global circulations at work in this geographically small, yet culturally expansive community. In the process, it demonstrated that
globalization, locality, and tradition are not mutually exclusive entities, but rather, intrinsically connected, as evidenced through works such as the *Bridge Bowl*.

The *Bridge Bowl* complicates and contradicts, but ultimately reconciles and resolves. It contains, spans, and expands relationships between globalization and local identity and tradition. The *Bridge Bowl* does not hold water but crosses it. It bridges a space where more fluid, complex, and expansive understandings of identity and tradition can occur, and contains ideas that are constantly in motion. It repositions and unflattens perceptions of the Seagrove pottery tradition, but extends to other traditional material culture practices as well. In this particular act of translation, it reveals objects’ power to illuminate identity and tradition as ever-evolving processes and products of multiple voices, relationships, and paradoxes always in conversation.

Tradition, in the ways defined here, has potential as a generative framework for future explorations of artistic identity. Rather than flatten an artist’s work and practice to something that is stagnant or confined to a particular place, studying traditions in a global context illustrates the expansive and multifaceted networks continually at work in the minds of artists and their audiences. The next chapter carries these ideas of tradition into an exploration of *community* as another useful and generative tool for thinking about both ideological and tangible artistic networks, as captured in the life and work of textile artist Dominie Nash.
CHAPTER 2.
COMMUNITY AND THE QUILT PARADOX:
THE TEXTILE ART OF DOMINIE NASH

Dominie Nash created a portrait of herself in *Stills From a Life 27* (Figure 3.1). Along with other works in the series, it illustrates her interest in aesthetic relationships and how she sees and encounters the world around her, finding value in what many might otherwise overlook. In portraying her daily surroundings, Nash experimented with proportion by altering the sizes of objects such as her sewing machine and items on and around her worktable, along with their details and shadows. Objects appear and reappear from a variety of perspectives and angles, but obscured and altered. Each of the work’s nine panels functions individually, but colors, patterns, textures, and motifs throughout reinforce their interactions with one another. These abstract squares of quilted, hand-stitched, and appliquéd fabric declare to her audience, “This is what I do. This is who I am.”

Through repeated shapes and patterns, a spectrum of color and scale, and stitched details adding texture and accentuation, she demonstrates her creative and unexpected interpretations of tradition, genre, and community.

Nash’s visual style has shifted over her career trajectory, but her continued preference for abstraction and creating series’ rather than stand-alone pieces has allowed her to develop ideas and create bodies of work that “hold together well.” The metaphor of holding together similarly elucidates the role of community and relationships in her art practice, especially through her

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85 Appliqué is a technique that involves sewing pieces of fabric to another, larger piece of fabric. Unless stated otherwise, all quotes and ideas from Dominie Nash within this chapter come from two in-person interviews between her and myself from April 17 and July 14, 2016.
immediate and far-reaching networks and their tangible role in the reception and development of her work.

The last chapter considered Chris Luther’s *Bridge Bowl* and its expansive expression of *tradition* in Seagrove, North Carolina. The idea of *tradition* as both static and dynamic carries into Dominie Nash’s textile art, and her practice additionally connects ideas of *tradition* to those
of *community*. Tradition, or “how one idea leads to the next,” represents individual actions as well as a point of departure, and the latter part of this definition links people to one or many communities. Regardless of geographical proximity to a group, as people create, perform, or in some way respond to what has come before, they simultaneously express individual and communal identity.\(^{86}\)

Communities are social and cultural systems, conceived not in isolation, but within, between, and around other systems and networks. Concepts of *community* or *group* are at the center of many ethnographers’ work, and their immersive approach illuminates the complexities and fragilities of trying to define *community* in any single or distinct way, as explained by folklorist Dorothy Noyes in her definition of *group*:

> We learn in interaction of the status differences within a group that may make men public, and women private, performers; we discover the creative individual whose influence galvanizes and directs performance in a particular milieu; we find that a festival declared by all to be a celebration of unity is in fact animated by vigorous factionalism; we discover the complex networks of contacts and influences feeding into and emerging from an apparently bounded community.\(^{87}\)

Noyes distinguishes between the “empirical network of interactions in which culture is created and moves,” and “the community of the social imaginary that occasionally emerges in performance,” and proposes an understanding of *group* that combines the two. She additionally situates groups as products of interaction rather than precondition or homogeneity, and argues for

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\(^{87}\) Noyes, “Group,” 7-8.
expansive approaches to networks, which undergird social and cultural practices and provide a framework for discussing the range of individuals’ relationships.88

This chapter draws on definitions of group by Noyes and other folklorists’, who have largely avoided using the term community because it is so “affectively charged.”89 In response to previously normative generalizations of community and belonging, which flatten and haunt individual identity through inscriptions and categorizations of embodiment, I argue for a definition of community that is more fluid, inclusive, and generative. My own use of the term leans heavily into its particular affective relationship with previous ideas and imaginaries within the reception of textile art in order to confront, challenge, and redirect the ideas of community or communal embedded within canonical expectations of quilts and other textiles. I consider the complexities of community for Nash and her art practice and what they offer for a broader understanding of art making and art makers. To address these intricacies, I employ two framing ideas that Nash introduced in the course of our interviews: the quilt paradox and a textile sensibility.

Nash discusses the “quilt ghetto”—what I refer to as the quilt paradox—as a place where, she explains, “we all feel like we are sort of stuck in this little category that doesn’t fit anywhere except among ourselves.” This feeling of being stuck outside, yet in a category understood only by insiders to the group is common among textile artists, in particular those working with quilting techniques. In this way, the quilt paradox illuminates the tensions of assigning a category to artists who appear outside categories altogether and the resulting difficulties in exhibiting their art. Nash’s work is rarely immediately detectable as textile or quilt in

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89 Noyes, “Group,” 27.
photographic form or when seen from a distance, which on the one hand allows viewers to consider the composition and design of her work out of context and without medium-based categorization. However, when viewed up close, compositional interest and design is too often overlooked as soon as medium and technique are deciphered. As Nash explains:

The extreme example is a quilter will look at the work and say, “How did you do that?” or “How did you put that together and what stitches did you use on your sewing machine?” That’s the extreme end, whereas I’d like someone to look at it and say, “Well that’s an interesting composition. What were you thinking about when you put that together? How did you figure out your color relationships?” You know, just like you would with any piece of art, rather than the quilt police coming and counting your stitches.

In a later interview, Nash compared this to artists working in more canonical mediums: “I don’t know how much other artists get asked [about technique]... it’s hard for me to imagine a painter being asked about how they make their brushstrokes.”

Furthermore, Nash’s deviation from traditional quilt patterns and her art’s closer resemblance to modern paintings often results in viewers questioning her decision to use fabric: “[P]eople say, ‘Why don’t you paint? Your work looks more like painting.’ You know, I don’t want to paint. I can’t get that texture… all the things that happen with textiles. It sort of shifts and changes… it’s just constantly changing… when you put paint on a canvas, it’s sort of there.”

In this way, Nash’s choice of medium has little to do with genres or iconic quilt patterns and everything to do with fabric itself and its unique qualities. Nash also likes that quilting and layering fabrics allows her the flexibility to experiment with all varieties of altering textiles because she can always add layers and cover up details she doesn’t like.

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91 Nash also likes that quilting and layering fabrics allows her the flexibility to experiment with all varieties of altering textiles because she can always add layers and cover up details she doesn’t like.
textile arts. Most notably, the overstated associations between quilts, women’s hobbies, and domestic work continue to haunt all textile artists to some degree. In this way, the quilt paradox represents a place of reduction and the tendency to flatten textile artists and their work by identifying them solely as part of a larger community or group; mainly, as hobby quilters rather than individual artists whose medium of choice happens to be fabric and who are working within and between multiple types of artistic circles.

In response, textile artists have employed a variety of aesthetic and ideological approaches to sustain, challenge, or subvert the quilt paradox. Some adamantly reject quilt history and its parallel assumptions for artists working with fabric, perhaps situating themselves simply as artists rather than quilters or weavers. Others prize that historical tradition above creativity, composition, and innovation by harnessing their skills in technique, or in other cases, embracing the medium’s historical ties as a catalyst for present political and social intervention. Though personally less interested in the connection that many women find in the history of quilting as a female-dominated, domestic practice, Nash recognizes the tensions between ideologies that are political and aesthetic and believes in a balance between the two. She appreciates the emphasis on innovative compositions and techniques from art quilt and contemporary art cultures, while the importance of community and working relationships rooted in historical quilt culture has been vital to the reception and progression of her work.

Where the quilt paradox responds to haunted imaginaries of community within the reception of textile art—similar to stereotypes and expectations accompanying social imaginaries

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92 Even if a contemporary quilter is far removed from the historical tradition of quilt making, their works continue to be haunted by connections to femininity, domesticity, handicraft, and community, which I discuss later in the context of Bernard L. Herman’s four damnations consigning quilts to the parameters of art canons.

outlined in the introductory chapter—a textile sensibility responds more to ideas of community implicit in the process of working with textiles and the networks of support that extend from it. In an interview for *Artful Home*, Nash explains: “There are qualities inherent in art made of fabric and thread that can’t be duplicated in another medium.” A textile sensibility, from Nash’s perspective, may translate to painting or sculpture, but it rarely works in reverse. For example, she talks about tapestries translated from painting which aren’t successful, as well as “soft sculpture,” or an early movement of artists trying to make textiles just as they would sculptures in wood or hard material, some of which were more successful, but others which had a “well-deserved end,” according to her.

The rigidities within Nash’s defining of a textile sensibility’s parameters are important to note; even as Nash and other textile artists argue for broader experimentation with textile art, they have strong opinions on what this should or shouldn’t look like, and many of these may conflict with others’ viewpoints, sometimes even my own. A textile sensibility in Nash’s practice, however, refers to the spontaneity of working with fabric as well as her collage-like process. She enjoys the release of control and element of surprise that fabric offers her: “I love fabric. I love manipulating it… [and] all of the surprises—because a lot of my work surprises me, either in a good way or a bad way… It just holds my interest as nothing else does.”

Nash’s experiences making and exhibiting textile art reveal a transitional but growing desire to locate fiber art within art historical canons, but a lack of the tools necessary to do so, even among textile artists themselves. Many traditional quilters remain somewhat skeptical of the art world and its distance from what they consider to be real life, while many art quilters

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distance themselves from the quilt world and what they perceive as a lack of individual expression among traditional quilters sticking so closely to patterns. Despite expansions in the field and efforts to include textiles in art galleries and museums, these remain places of uncertainty, conflict, and exclusion.

Both the quilt paradox and a textile sensibility imply a sense of community, whether imagined or actual. Together, they reveal textile art’s simultaneously privileged, yet marginalized position within the contemporary art world. This chapter investigates the multifaceted roles of community—as an historical experience and imagined idea, as the foundation of personal and professional networks and relationships more broadly, and as a visual theme—within the design, construction, and reception of textile art. The first section of this chapter introduces Dominie Nash and her background in greater detail and delineates how the trajectory of her career parallels the history of textile art, and especially art quilt production and its reception in the second half of the twentieth century. Closely tied to this are the idiosyncrasies of the quilt paradox, along with their impact on the making and exhibiting of textile art from a variety of backgrounds. I consider ideas and expectations of community in quilting tradition and history and connect them to moments in Nash’s career.

In the second section, I explore the idea of a textile sensibility and link it to those of community within Nash’s art practice and the multiple professional and personal circles with which she associates. While the quilt paradox is fraught with generalities that affect Nash’s ability to exhibit her work in the ways she would prefer and ultimately distances her from quilting’s rich history and tradition, a textile sensibility connects her to other contemporary

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textile artists, the fluidity of their practice, and the communal aspects of quilt history and tradition that continue to resonate with textile artists today. Importantly, the complexities of Nash’s work and how she identifies herself requires an understanding of art making and creative practice beyond canon formation and the exclusive sorting of artists according to medium, background, and group affiliation. The threads between her life and environment, the many communities to which she belongs, and the history of textile art and its reception are intimately tied to her work, as evidenced through the compositions and processes of creating the Stills From a Life series.

**Receiving Art Quilts: The Quilt Paradox**

*Stills From a Life*

Nash describes her still life works as her “little personal journal” of the objects and images she encounters. In *Stills From a Life* 27, we experience her surroundings and how she values her work and interacts with her working environment. Visual details of her day-to-day life—her studio’s checkered floor, a brown basket holding brightly colored objects, cups and containers, and implements vital to her creative practice, including pens, pencils, and her sewing machine—are immediate and personal. Each row illustrates a particular area of her studio and depicts familiar objects using varying lines, patterns, shapes, and colors that echo and shift from panel to panel. In her artist statement for the *Stills From a Life* series, Nash explains, “It’s surprising to look at familiar objects in a new context, such as setting up a still life composition. Often the homeliest or most ordinary things have the most interesting shapes and patterns when abstracted and made to interact with each other.”

to interact with each other” in Nash’s compositions provides a metaphor for the importance of connectivity, community, and relationships in her life and work.

*Stills From a Life* also illuminates the unexpected in Nash’s practice through her positioning among multiple worlds of creative practice, reception, and dialogue. It mixes canonical artistic genres and styles with unconventional materials, while simultaneously deviating from traditional quilting techniques and rules. As a synthesis of “self portrait” and “still life,” for example, it mediates two genres more immediately identifiable with canvas or paper, but combines them with techniques and materials more exclusive to quilting. Similarly, while her use of fabric and quilting methods connects her to the world of quilt practices, exhibitions, competitions, and communities, other aspects of *Stills From a Life* reveal her instinct to go against the grain. Through her liberal use of yellow fabric (infamous for dominating compositions), “unfinished” or roughly finished edges (atypical for quilts), and even the notion of working in series rather than creating singular works, she breaks elemental rules of quilting design and technique. Ultimately, her interest in creating harmonious compositions and designs for the wall rather than the bed positions her work within the contemporary art world and elevates her medium from hobby or handicraft to *art*.  

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98 While working in series is more in line with how traditional quilters work in particular styles, such as the “Log Cabin Style,” the art canonical structures I mention here are constituted by singular canonical works that “individually epitomize and reify typically unarticulated systems of taste and power.” If for example, there was a series of *Mona Lisa* paintings, rather than a singular work, that would severely take away from the power and value of the painting as a canonical work. By consciously working in a series rather than creating individual pieces, Nash rejects this canonical structure. See Bernard L. Herman, “The Archival Box: A Meditation on Photography’s Vernacular Histories,” *Exposure: Journal of the Society for Photographic Education* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 4-12.

99 Importantly, Nash distinguishes quilts as *art* along lines of use and design: quilts as *art* deviate from traditional patterns and are hung on the wall, while traditional quilts closely following patterns are used as bed coverings. Traditional quilts, to her, represent a specific idea, but the defining qualities of art quilts in general are more ambiguous and fluid. For this reason, and to destabilize the hierarchical power and assumptions related to high/low class that are often embedded in definitions of Art with a capital A, I don’t distinguish between the two and hereafter use “art” without italicized emphasis or quotes to refer to
Nash’s experimentation with fabric began at an early age. Her mother, who learned to make tablecloths and other textiles as a young girl, always encouraged Nash to sew her own clothes. Nash retained these skills and interests from childhood, and later in life, after leaving a doctoral program in sociology and profession in social work, had a career in weaving for many years, occasionally working with batik techniques and textile dyeing as well. Beyond this, Nash cites pivotal experiences informative to finding her artistic style, starting with a weaving class in which the instructor encouraged students to think about artists working in other mediums, their use of color and shape, and how they might carry these fundamental aesthetic ideas into their weaving. Nash describes this moment as eye opening because she learned how techniques and styles outside of textiles could translate into her own artistic practice. Eventually, she gave up weaving to work exclusively in quilting.

Formal training in the fiber arts wasn’t a strong option at the time and so Nash is largely self-taught—a designation she didn’t think much about until recognizing that, in the technique-concerned world of quilters, she did things that “scandalized” them, including her strong use of yellow fabric and her roughly finished, unbound edges. How-to books and catalogs of contemporary quilters provided her with the technical guidance and creative inspiration in her early years, along with no small amount of trial and error. Nash began by experimenting with all modes of creative outlet. When quoting or referencing other artists’ distinctions between Art and art, I will use “art” without quotation marks.

Batik refers to a technique of wax-resist dyeing, in which the wax resist is applied to a piece of cloth through drawing or printing, and the areas of application will reject the dye unless removed with boiling water. Nash, interview, 2001

While there were several schools around the country offering textile programs in the 1970s, the combination of her husband’s work and their growing family limited her to the Baltimore area. The one program in the region was at Antioch College, which did not interest her.
established block patterns, such as log cabin and other styles, but even early on, she explains, “I always had to mess them up in some way.” Quickly recognizing the difficulty of constructing a technically perfect or symmetrical quilt, Nash deviated from patterns and incorporated her own dyed and printed fabrics. She realized the possibilities were endless if she didn’t have to “stick to the grid,” and eventually moved away from patterns entirely and toward free-form appliqué techniques. Nash says that she found her style after participating in an early workshop in which students were asked to replicate a photograph into a composition in their own medium. She found she could create exciting effects by combining her batik fabrics—a practice she continues today. This recognition of her distinct creative approach coincided with the move into her first art studio, which provided Nash with the large spaces and walls needed to make and display her work. Importantly, it also helped her distinguish her art practice as professional rather than domestic work. The more time she spent working with textiles, especially outside the home, the more it became a means of identifying herself and her work: “And it just got to be a bigger and bigger part of my life until… I guess it’s my profession.”

**Exhibiting Art Quilts/Quilts as Art**

The distinctions made between quilting as professional work rather than a hobby are intimately connected with textile art’s reception within the contemporary art world. This reception follows a broad and uneven trajectory, and details surrounding the reception of art quilts, in particular, have strong parallels to the development of Nash’s career. Many scholars and curators have made efforts to move beyond the flattened perception of quilts as having a

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singular domestic history separate from the professional art world. In his discussion of the “art of the quilt,” Bernard Herman describes quilts as “elusive things” with important but overstated connections to domestic life, family, and the home, all of which privilege a particular kind of subjective and affective response. They remain fraught with assumptions related to craft and use, and these assumptions more often than not correspond to what he calls the four damnations assigning quilts to the sidelines: connections to handicraft, domesticity, femininity, and community.\textsuperscript{104}

In her critical text, \textit{The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine}, Rozsika Parker similarly recognized the connections between hierarchies of art/craft and categories of masculine/feminine. She elaborated on the development of an ideology of femininity, which historically paralleled the emerging separation of art and craft during the Italian Renaissance, especially as embroidery increasingly became the domain of unpaid, domestic women’s work. The divide strengthened with the shift from craft-based workshops to art academies in the eighteenth century, at the same time that ideologies of femininity as “natural to women” were evolving.\textsuperscript{105} Associations between painting as a man’s public, professional work, and therefore \textit{art} solidified the links between textiles as a woman’s private, domestic hobby, and therefore \textit{craft} by way of their perceived opposition. With it, formulations of \textit{craft} as a critical category secondary to \textit{art} became embedded in museum, education, and public

\textsuperscript{104} As Herman suggests, these qualities also subject quilts and other textile and fiber art to the same canons, hierarchies, and reductive relationships that put them there. In the context of art, canons respond to particular forms of aesthetic knowledge and power. In the context of quilts, the canonical often comes from three categories deployed for judging quilts in competition, including technique, design, and the “wow” factor. In recognizing the four damnations and their historical roots, Herman also examines their utility for finding meaning in textiles beyond stereotype. Bernard L. Herman, “‘A cloak for all my errors’: Voice, Virtuosity, and the Art of the Quilt,” in \textit{Layers: Unfolding the Stories of Chester County Quilts}, ed. Catherine E. Hutchins (West Chester, PA: Chester County Historical Society, 2009), 14.

discourse. As Parker argued, “[R]ather than acknowledging that needlework and painting are different but equal arts, embroidery and crafts associated with ‘the second sex’ or the working class are accorded lesser artistic value.”

This oversimplification of textiles as craft and painting as art is especially inaccurate for capturing the multiple networks and cultures at play in the broader, contemporary textile community. To better understand the nuances of these aesthetic and ideological systems, feminist theorist Susan Bernick separates contemporary textile origins into the categories of art quilt, feminist, and traditional quilt cultures in her important essay, “A Quilt Is an Art Object when It Stands Up like a Man.” She suggests that traditional quilters, especially those inspired by the 1976 Bicentennial and its renewed interest in America’s folk arts and craft heritage, don’t often theorize about or document their work, and therefore tend to be belittled or ignored by art quilt culture and feminists. While “traditional quilt culture is the trunk from which the other quilt culture branches grew,” art quilters or others in the art world have dismissed much of the traditional quilting world as sticking too closely to patterns without individual expression. At the same time, traditional quilters, Bernick explains, remain somewhat skeptical of the art world and its distance from real life, or the lived contexts in which quilts were made and used.

Many of the distinctions Bernick makes between the categories of traditional, feminist, and art quilts correspond to reception. Feminist quilt culture, while incredibly diverse, is made up of artists creating quilts directly for the art market. Rooted in the treatment of quilting as an artistic tradition on its own terms, feminist approaches to quilts evolved outside art world culture for many years, but still carried with them shared assumptions and evaluative practices. Feminist

106 Parker, The Subversive Stitch, 5.

quilters and scholars have emphasized the important role that quilting has played in women’s social and emotional lives in many corners of the world, and have studied quilts as important documents through which to understand women’s lives. Feminist concerns, however, have focused less on the aesthetics of quilts, and the absence of visual analysis has too often reduced quilts to their contextual content, including the makers’ background, community, and the history of the medium in which they work. This historical context isn’t entirely applicable or important to many art quilters, including Dominie Nash, yet it continues to haunt the way people view, evaluate, and make sense of all textiles.

The absence of exhibitions and texts focusing on textile aesthetics over contextual content was a hole Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof hoped to fill with their 1971 exhibition, *Abstract Design in American Quilts*. The exhibition traveled from the Whitney Museum of Art to the Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C. among other museums around the world, and was an enormous source of inspiration for Nash and many other art quilters at the time. Importantly, it privileged visual content over “technique, geographical distinction, and historical significance,” and looked closely at pattern and line rather than fabric, stitching, and regional traits. Abstract Design in American Quilts was organized around Holstein and van der Hoof’s personal collection of pieced quilts. They also wrote the catalogue for the exhibition; in it, they acknowledged the tendency to cherish quilts for their associations and utilitarian value, and the difficulties of appreciating quilts as an important creative outlet. They also briefly outlined different quilting techniques and the history of quilts in the United States, being careful to emphasize that many quilters were not solely devoted to the maintenance of families and that quilting was both “welcome work” and an important “means of expressing feelings for color and

design.” By emphasizing, above all social or cultural context, “quilts as visual phenomena” throughout American history, Holstein and van der Hoof hoped to rid them of the “bedspread/craft/mythology baggage” of historical quilt culture.109

While the exhibition’s gravitation toward the visual impact of traditional patterns and variations was of less interest to Nash’s own practice, this moment of seeing textiles and quilts in a major museum of fine art inspired her and other artists working in mediums previously thought to be “unconventional” to see their own work as art. Early artists, who were trained largely in painting and printmaking, started experimenting with fabric using traditional techniques but eventually moved into their own style. An important facet of this movement was the application of techniques and processes from mediums more commonly associated with fine art to fabrics and quilt making. When these artists began teaching other textile artists, this more or less solidified the field of textile arts, and especially art quilts as a distinct category.110

In line with Holstein and van der Hoof’s efforts, textile scholar and curator Robert Shaw defines art quilts in opposition to the “traditional bedquilts from which they have grown.”111 Art quilts, he explains, “are intended primarily as works of visual art, to be hung on gallery walls


111 Scholars and curators such as Penny McMorris and Michael Kile have traced the roots of art quilts as far back as the British Arts and Crafts Movement, but the earliest American artists working in the tradition didn’t distinguish their work as “art quilts” until long after. The term was officially coined in 1984 as the title of a traveling exhibition, The Art Quilt, which McMorris and Kile curated. Martha Sielman lists other important milestones in establishing art quilt’s place in the “art world,” including the first Quilt National exhibition in 1979, the founding of the Woman of Color Quilters Network in 1985, and the founding of Studio Art Quilt Associates (SAQA) in 1989. Martha Sielman, Masters, Art Quilts: Major Works by Leading Artists (New York: Lark Books, 2008), 6; Kate Lenkowski, Contemporary Quilt Art: An Introduction and Guide (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 8, 22; Robert Shaw, Contemporary Art Quilts: From the Collection of John M. Walsh III (Lexington: University of Kentucky Art Museum, 2001), 7.
rather than to cover beds. Most have the same basic structure as a traditional quilt… but the great majority are intentionally non-functional, made not to decorate a bed or provide warmth to a sleeper but instead to express and communicate their creator’s artistic vision.” As Shaw suggests, many, but not all artists represented under the category of “art quilters” or “quilt artists” specifically distance themselves from the term “quiltmakers.” Art quilts therefore occupy a privileged but charged position between what is thought of as “traditional quilts” and “contemporary art” or “studio craft.” As Kristin Langellier describes in her essay on phenomenology, feminism, quiltmaking, and communication, when the art quilt emerged in the 1970s, “serious quilters” were distinguished from “ordinary quilters,” and aesthetic canons of innovation and individual vision become more highly prized than those of traditional quiltmaking. A few years following the important 1984 exhibition, The Art Quilt, curator Penny McMorris similarly described art quilts as having been judged and juried more critically by those that are “knowledgeable about art and unsentimental about quilts.”

While Holstein and van der Hoof’s exhibition privileged historical, traditional quilts rather than contemporary art quilts, it paralleled many of the celebrations and critiques of the broader art quilt movement. Many contemporary textile artists agree that art quilt culture has important roots in Abstract Design in American Quilts and the 1971 exhibition itself was celebrated for challenging preconceptions of quilts as craft rather than art, but Susan Bernick

112 Shaw, Contemporary Art Quilts, 7.
113 Lenkowsky, Contemporary Quilt Art, 3.
argues that this is “only to the extent that [quilts] have been taken away from traditional quilt culture and defeminized.” She believes that feminists, in particular “have to acknowledge the extent to which we have contributed to the gulf between traditional artists and art quilters, both feminist and not.” Furthermore, by treating quilts as art on their terms, connoisseurs such as Holstein and van der Hoof failed to appreciate or understand the extent to which these quilts were already considered works of art within the communities and traditions from which they were appropriated.

Some critics of the show additionally responded negatively to the “academic standards of art” that informed the quilts that Holstein and van der Hoof—with the assistance and advise of many of their New York City-based artist friends including Roy Lichtenstein—chose to present, as well as the means by which they were presented. They also suggested that the exhibition too strongly established public expectations of what a “good” quilt is, without paying enough scholarly attention to the cultures of quilts and quilting—all of which possess their own standards of quality. Quilt show judges across the United States, for example, follow a uniform set of standards in their evaluations, organized into three broad categories: design, workmanship, and appearance. The first deals primarily with composition, including complexity, proportion, and thoughtfulness of the design. The second assesses multiple factors of the quality


of workmanship, including but not limited to stitching techniques and neatness. The final deals with the appeal of the quilt as a whole, or the “wow factor.”

In contrast, Holstein and van der Hoof’s standards for a “good” quilt created a particular kind of imagined quilt community, based closely on their own connoisseurship and interest in modern aesthetics rather than those of the quilters or communities in which the quilts were made.

As Janneken Smucker details in her book, *Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon*:

> When they wandered through junk shops and flea markets, van der Hoof would rummage through old trunks looking at textiles, while Holstein would marvel at the joinery on old chests. After seeing countless quilts, she began to point out to him “how much they looked like works of art.” As they continued to search for antiques, they started to take mental note of the hundreds of examples of historic quilts they encountered. The objects appealed to them, not because they might serve as charming bedcovers, but because they were, as Holstein later recalled, “attuned to modernism.”

Holstein and van der Hoof saw quilts as powerful visual objects that anticipated much of modern art, including works by Andy Warhol and Kenneth Noland, but their imagined quilt community

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120 Examples of these assessments and each category’s relationship to the other can be found in the juror’s statements of catalogs for the *Quilt National*. For example, M. Loan Lintault, an artist and juror for the 2005 *Quilt National* explains, “Technique, craftsmanship, or subject alone does not make a successful work; infusing the work with the artist’s personality and individual touch is what makes the work provocative.” Miriam Nathan-Roberts, another juror for the 2005 *Quilt National* additionally describes her expectations and how they were challenged when viewing the works submitted for the show: “I was sure that I would judge purely on good composition, design, and visual impact. I believe that the artist’s concept and vision should dictate all the aspects of the work. The design, materials chosen, and techniques should all support that concept. This was all well and good in theory, but, in fact, you cannot divorce the medium, in this case primarily fabric, from the work.” *Quilt National 2005* (New York: Lark Books, 2005), 9-11; Herman, “‘A cloak for all my errors,’” 13.

121 Sociological scholar Karin Peterson wrote an article on Holstein and van der Hoof’s use of discourse and display to persuade the fine art world to appreciate quilts on purely artistic grounds. She emphasizes issues raised by efforts to fit marginalized cultural products into fine art frames, referencing Pierre Bourdieu’s term “pure gaze,” which relies on an act of detachment on the part of the viewer: “In other words, Bourdieu argues that viewers who experience a work of art from an art-for-art’s-sake perspective can do so because they have the privilege and capacity to distance themselves from worldly concerns as they stand before it.” My project draws on this idea, additionally situating Holstein and van der Hoof’s ability to detach the quilts from their original context as a kind of community-making project. Karin Elizabeth Peterson, “Discourse and Display: The Modern Eye, Entrepreneurship, and the Cultural Transformation of the Patchwork Quilt,” *Sociological Perspectives* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 461-2; Janneken Smucker, *Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 66-7.
was not inclusive of all quilts. They were selective about what they purchased and exhibited, particularly avoiding appliqué quilts with figurative or stylized designs, which they argued were “more decorative” and lacked the “stronger visual characteristics” of pieced quilts.¹²²

Holstein and van der Hoof received criticism for intentionally distancing their assessments of good quilts from the original contexts and communities in which the quilts were made and used, but the chasm between focusing too strongly on either contextual or aesthetic content without some bridge between the two endures today. Nash’s own experiences and frustrations exhibiting at both textile-specific and all-media shows speak to this, especially through viewers and jurors’ repeated emphasis on her technique or technical choices over composition or design. Despite this tendency to flatten textile art to its technical rather than compositional or creative history and tradition, many art quilters’ textile sensibilities purposefully and powerfully connect the contexts of tradition, community, and feminism with innovative aesthetic ideas in the work they make.

A Textile Sensibility: Community and Contemporary Textiles
Quilting and Community as Intervention

Jean Ray Laury was a particularly important artist, teacher, and inspiration for other contemporary art quilters, including Nash, from the 1970s until she passed away in 2011. Laury bridged feminist, traditional, and art quilt cultures, used her art to make statements about society, and lived out her political beliefs through her teaching approaches. One of her better-known

¹²² Importantly, Holstein and van der Hoof’s imagined quilt community based on visual similarities to modern art was part of a much larger national movement. Rooted in early-twentieth century interests in American folk art as well as the 1960s craft revival, this movement looked longingly to America’s rural and handcrafted past to locate distinctively American roots of modern art. Holstein, Abstract Design in American Quilts, 10; Smucker, Amish Quilts, 88.
pieces, *Barefoot and Pregnant* (Figure 3.2), for example, referenced a 1963 quote by now-deceased Paul Van Dalsem, who was known as “the barefoot and pregnant Senator.” Laury included the full quote in her work:

> Once upon a time there was a senator from Arkansas… in a famous speech he said: I’ll tell you what we do up here in Perry County when one of our women starts poking around in something she doesn’t know anything about. We get her an extra milk cow. If that doesn’t work, we give her a little more garden to tend. And if that’s not enough, we get her pregnant and keep her barefoot. *Legislator Paul Van Dalsem from a speech to the Little Rock Optimist Club.*

The quilt’s nine panels include cartoon-style illustrations of Van Dalsem, a woman, her bare foot, the books and spectacles that “she doesn’t know anything about,” and a cow, plow, and garden representing the domestic work that is supposed to keep her busy. As Laury explained in a 2000 interview, “He always claimed he had been quoted out of context. When you went back and read the whole two sentences, it was even worse. And I just thought nobody should forget who that man was and so that is what prompted it, and having it in that cartoon format, people do read it.”123 The work was picked up and reproduced by Planned Parenthood as a fundraiser poster, and received a mixed response at the time. Overall, however, many women appreciated its humorous approach to confronting the familiarity of Van Dalsem’s sexist banality.

Laury spoke in detail about her interests in working with women and desire to help them understand their own talents, abilities, and creative avenues long overlooked or discouraged. Similar to others in the feminist quilt community described by Susan Bernick, Laury believed that quilts and other textiles had a particular historical significance for women and that the continuity established throughout the history of making and passing on quilts among women

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created a feeling of community among quilters. This sense of continuity and community has had a strong contemporary presence in the broader quilt world. For example, while many efforts

124 When property and estate laws determined that women didn’t inherit possessions and everything they had belonged to their husbands, fabrics were often an exception to this. Quilts in particular could be left to a daughter or other women in the family. Jean Ray Laury, interview with Le Rowell, *Quilters Save Our Stories, International Quilt Festival*, Houston, Texas, November 2, 2000, http://quiltalliance.org/projects/qsos/.

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to document quilts in the last four decades have been informed by feminist concerns, they relied on traditional quilters and their organizations for locating textiles to document and exhibit. In her lifetime, Laury saw enormous strides toward the acceptance of quilts and other textiles as art, and she cited the quilt community as largely responsible for this:

[They] will go out and find a junior high gymnasium or a bank lobby to rent, or a room at the community college and they put on a show and then somebody finds out four thousand people came in over the weekend and they’re very impressed, so next time they invite the group to show at the arts center. So I think the fact that more and more quilt shows are being given in museums comes from the fact that quilters themselves have done a lot of this and they’ve kind of come in through the back door instead of the front door.\textsuperscript{125}

Yet, quilts continue to be seen as less important than mediums such as sculpture and painting, and difficulties in selling textiles and getting others to see them as valuable relate to associations with quilts as predominantly utilitarian, rather than visual or artistic things.\textsuperscript{126}

The question of whether quilts or other textiles are objects of art rather than or in addition to utility has plagued the reception of textile artists for years, even following exhibitions celebrating their aesthetic value after 1971. It motivated textile artists like Laury to confront it head on through the subject and substance of their work, yet the question continues to be asked today. As Laury suggested in a 2000 interview, shared frustrations among textile artists have also led to a solidifying of group or community identity. When rejected or dismissed in the museum and gallery world, many quilters have found a welcome home exhibiting and working closely alongside other likeminded artists, but even these shared spaces are not entirely inclusive of the

\textsuperscript{125} Laury, interview, November 2, 2000.

\textsuperscript{126} Laury, along with other feminist artists and scholars, argued that this was because of their identification with women and women’s work, which has lived on through both men and women’s perspectives, though not necessarily intentionally. Women have historically been less encouraged than men to think about careers or to consider their work as valuable; because quilts are associated with homemaking and child rearing, they are not equated with money. Laury, interview, November 3, 2000.
broad range of textile artists working today.

One example of this is the sheer number of annual quilt-specific exhibitions and competitions, such as the biennial *Quilt National* or biannual *International Quilt Festival* held in Houston and Chicago, which bring together hundreds of quilt artists from around the country and world who want to showcase and compete with their work. Within these spaces, judgments of critical assessment have a deep and specific history, and are especially evident in quilt competition guidelines around design, workmanship, and appearance. Importantly, each of these categories contains ideas about quality and their ties to two primary worlds of creative textile practice. Quality in technique and workmanship relates to quilting patterns and histories of domestic work, but quality in visual impact and design relates to histories of art.¹²⁷ Contemporary quilters and textile artists often find themselves between these two worlds, and for some, including Nash, the persistent emphasis on technique and workmanship conflicts with how they view and value their own work. After entering a judged quilt show early on in her career, Nash’s feedback sheet revealed the judge’s primary focus on imperfections in her technical details rather than her composition or creativity. Despite repeated questions or comments about her process or workmanship, she explains, “The goal is to have people look at the work and see it as a composition, as color, as an idea, rather than the technique.”

Nash doesn’t see her work or process as fitting into the quilt world and only rarely enters juried quilt or textile shows, which place less of an emphasis on technique and craftsmanship than judged quilt shows such as the *International Quilt Festival*. In an effort to pull away from the quilt paradox and its fascination with technique, Nash and other textile artists have focused their efforts on exhibiting in all-media rather than only quilt-specific shows or venues. This is

¹²⁷ Herman, “‘A cloak for all my errors,’” 14.
partly to create the association in viewers’ minds that textiles have just as much creative potential as any other medium. Additionally, jurors for all-media shows frequently won’t realize what they are looking at unless they are familiar with textiles, so they are forced to judge works more on aesthetic, rather than technical grounds. While some textile artists embrace the history and techniques of quilting, Nash believes their reluctance to pull away from the historical tradition has held back textile artists as a whole for too long. This is a central aspect of the quilt paradox; by focusing primarily on technique rather than design or experimentation with material, they choose to stay in the “quilt ghetto,” according to Nash.

There are understandable motivations for not branching out. Judged quilt shows are often less rigid in what they will accept, and traditional and technique-oriented works tend to receive larger awards than those from artists who experiment with technique and composition. In these spaces, artists who stay in what Nash describes as the “quilt ghetto” tend to have greater success. Similarly, the number of textile-exclusive shows, events, and opportunities offers Nash and other textile artists a whole set of exhibitions unavailable to artists working in other mediums, many of which tend to be more competitive because of the sheer number, for example, of painters versus textile artists. Nash especially values the support system in place for textile artists:

People I know who are painters and printmakers… they envy the support community that textile artists have. They feel they are more competitive and there aren’t those organizations and critique groups. I don’t know if that’s because most of the painters came out of an art school background, whereas a lot of the textile artists didn’t, and so we sort of formed our own networks.

Nash links this support system and network to the history of quilts as utilitarian, household objects for which women exchanged patterns or worked together at quilting bees. Some textile

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128 What also carries over from this early history is a politeness that she occasionally finds frustrating; when critiquing each others work, Nash’s group members tend to withhold their critical feedback: “You have to ask for it. You have to say, ‘Please tell me. I’m concerned about this or that, or whether this works as a composition.’”
artists continue to focus their energy on quilt competitions and textile-specific shows, while others choose to dismiss textile history entirely, exhibiting exclusively in all-media shows. Textile-specific shows and working groups may bring textile artists more opportunities to show and discuss their work, but it doesn’t necessarily connect them to the contemporary art world at large. Many audiences simply don’t know the difference between quilters and other textile artists, or don’t have associations with textiles beyond bed covers.

Even in all-media spaces, however, Nash has encountered the quilt paradox on more than one occasion: “I was in a local, all-media show… the jury didn’t really know what [my work] was, and I think I got an award. I went to the opening, and he was a well-known local painter, and he’s talking about the work, and he went to the work and said, ‘I had no idea that this was textile. I probably wouldn’t have taken it if I had known.’” This lack of understanding or appreciation for textiles as art has also led others to try to legitimize, in their own minds, Nash’s works by connecting them to more expected and understood mediums, especially painting or printmaking. Another example of this occurred several years ago during a Baltimore art center critics review program, in which the program director came to Nash’s studio to evaluate and discuss her work. She recalls of this experience, “[H]e kept looking at the work… he said, ‘Oh, she’s really crossing over into painting. Look at that.’ And he just went on and on about how it wasn’t really textiles, it was painting… that kind of thing is hard to take.” Instances such as these have made Nash careful not to completely reject textile-specific opportunities, but she avoids calling herself a quilter and usually evades categories all together unless someone asks, in which case, she will describe herself as a textile artist or an artist who makes wall hangings.

Nash’s reluctance to be tied down to any one category or community responds to broader

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tensions in the quilt paradox between contemporary and historical textiles and their parallels and points of departure from the reception of quilts. A textile sensibility presents one potential bridge between these communities, located not in outdated correlations between femininity, domesticity, textiles, or technique, but in contemporary artistic networks and the inimitable qualities of working with fabric and thread.

**Locating Dominie Nash’s Community/Communities**

Dominie Nash believes in a fine balance between limiting one’s practice to historical textile arts methods and communities and ignoring tradition completely. Rather than utilize conventional quilt patterns or techniques, she borrows aesthetic ideas from other artistic practices and blends them with the distinctive possibilities of working with fabric. One aspect of the historical, communal tradition of quilts and textiles within Nash’s textile practice is her professional and personal relationships with other textile and all-media artists. Beyond this, Nash also describes a universal connection between people working in her medium—a bond emblematic of the textile sensibility, demonstrated through her strong connection to multiple artist groups, and further embedded and elaborated in the spontaneity of her collage-like process and aesthetic interest in creating relationships within and between works in her multiple ongoing series’.

After years of learning from how-to books, looking at catalogs of other artists for inspiration, and working from her own impulse, Nash met professional art quilters from around the country working with a variety of mixed media. She was particularly inspired by the “painterly” style of textile artists such as Elizabeth Busch, Linda Levin, and Joan Schulze.¹³⁰

Elizabeth Busch, for example, works in a variety of media, but her art quilts, which she describes as “sewn paintings,” are made of acrylic paint on canvas that she then hand quilts. This allows her “to become physically reacquainted with a piece created at arm’s length on the wall, and to add another visual dimension to it.” Busch hopes to communicate to a wide variety of audiences through her use of color and mark making, which she believes to be “a universal language.”

Linda Levin similarly quilts with fabrics that she has painted and dyed herself. Her inspiration comes from her memories of places she has seen and visited, but she aims to capture a mood or atmosphere rather than any particular location or scene. Joan Schulze has been experimenting with quilting and collaging dyed, printed, and painted fabrics and other mixed media throughout her career, and is considered a “master” of art quilts.

Around 1980, Nash also found local artists in the Washington, D.C. area who were, like her, interested in treating textiles in unconventional ways and distancing themselves from standard quilting techniques. Nash, along with her colleagues Sue Pierce and Lesly-Claire Greenberg, started an exhibiting group, New Image Artists, which is still operating today with around thirteen members. Their website describes their early approaches to “artist expression through quilted pieces meant for exhibiting rather than traditional use as bedcoverings.” Their primary goal, Nash explains, was to “find shows for quilts that weren’t bed quilts,” and they have since had many opportunities to exhibit their work locally, as well as outside of the area.

While they are all close friends, the group’s professional standards are also very high. Admittance into New Image Artists requires a recommendation from a group member and the ability to see their work online. They have branched out over the years to include artists producing works other than quilts, but their work must maintain a textile sensibility, either in materials or techniques. Of the four newest members to the group, for example, one works mostly with handmade paper, but uses stitching techniques, and another is a sculptor using fiber and clay. While the earliest group members started out producing more conventional quilts or using established quilt techniques, Nash explains that only one or two of the current members continue working in this way. Over the years, they have all encouraged each other to experiment, and they regularly meet to view each other’s work and attend lectures and exhibitions. Nash also describes this group as her support system; they are always around in case of a personal crisis and have been especially important to Nash since the passing of her husband in 2011. Of all the communities to which Nash belongs, this has been the most important for her in terms of creative growth and exhibiting her work.

Nash’s most immediate community includes her two studio mates, weaver Hillary Steel and printmaker Nancy MacNamara, and other multimedia artists in her building. Their close proximity has contributed to another aspect of Nash’s textile sensibility—the ability to incorporate techniques and design ideas from the two-dimensional communities of printmaking, drawing, and painting. Her studio mate, for example, taught her how to integrate printmaking into her fabric, but beyond specific instances such as this, working across media in the company of other artists has introduced Nash to new practices and motivated her to think about her work in more subtle ways. The prominence of paintings and prints around Nash’s studio building has especially given her ideas and inspiration beyond textiles. As she explains, “Like making me
think more about what I could be doing. I would have a hard time pinning it down when you ask me, but it stretches me… maybe I could broaden my ideas of what would be interesting to work with.”

Nash’s other professional network is an international exhibiting group, Quilt Art, which was originally founded in 1985 under the auspices of The Quilters’ Guild—the primary quilting group in Britain. While the majority of The Quilters’ Guild’s membership consisted of traditional quilters, the number of art quilters had grown significantly by the 1980s. At this point, the guild recognized a need for a new outlet to showcase their “unconventional, expressive, experimental, and challenging” work. Quilt Art acquired the status of an educational charity after becoming independent from the guild in 1987, the same year they held their first exhibition in the north of England. While there are many exhibiting quilt groups in Europe today, Quilt Art is both the oldest group of its kind in Europe and maintains a more rigorous selection process than many others.\footnote{Sara Impey, “Edsel & Eleanor Ford House, Grosse Pointe Shores, Michigan and Art of Quilting,” \textit{ARTES} Magazine, March 20, 2012, http://www.artesmagazine.com/?p=8621.} Their mission is “to extend the boundaries of quilting as an artistic medium and achieve wider recognition of the quilt as an art form… Quilt Art strives to maintain its unique reputation for integrity of expression and quality of craftsmanship. Each member brings a distinctive approach and the work is diverse, dynamic, and sometimes challenging.” A number of the artists also work in mixed media, but a textile sensibility is at the crux of the group.\footnote{“About Quilt Art,” Quilt Art, accessed November 29, 2017, http://quiltart.eu/aboutquiltart.html.}

Quilt Art currently consists of eighteen professional textile artists from Britain, Ireland, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, and the United States, but Nash describes them as having so much in common that cultural differences don’t matter. She was accepted to the group in 2002 after meeting a member from Germany who encouraged her to
apply. Similar to New Image Artists, much of their collaboration consists of planning and making works for exhibitions, as well as producing catalogs, but the community is also much more than that. They are professional, but most of the members are also good friends. They meet four times a year and Nash attends at least two of the weekend meetings, often staying longer to spend time with friends in the group. Participating in these shows gives Nash the chance to show her work internationally and inspires her to do her best work; their close personal relationships encourage her to continue showing with them despite the added effort of travelling and transporting her work abroad.

A combination of practicality and aesthetic interest led her to create the six-panel work, Stills From a Life 29 (Figure 3.3) for a Quilt Art show in Europe. Unlike her twenty-seventh work from the same series, she initially planned the work in pieces for practical purposes; it was much easier to sew and ship in smaller panels, but she ended up preferring the overall effect. Each image is a distinct composition and separating them into six panels made visual sense to
her. The complete work was based on a photograph she took at the home of a friend hosting one of their meetings in Germany. Nash admired her long dining room table furnished with drinking glasses holding yellow tulips and a red, plastic coffee carafe. In the left-most and top center panels, the bright red carafe sits on top of a blue patterned tablecloth, the latter of which appears in the right two panels as well. Parts of the plum-colored drinking glasses appear between five of the six panels. The yellow tulips have leapt out of the glass and the petals and leaves bounce from panel to panel. In the left and bottom center panels, the bright yellow color dictates the compositions, while elsewhere, more subtle patches of green and yellow hues interact with the glasses, carafe, and table. The surreal juxtaposition of the tulips and the glasses in which they would normally be housed is further augmented by the abundant swirling stitches in the white and gray areas of each of the panels.

Nash’s experimentation with scale and proportion between objects, shadows, and details, and alteration of some of the colors created an imaginative and harmonious exchange between objects. Just as the dinner table brings people together, the objects are also made to converse. By portraying the red glasses as purple to avoid clashing with the red carafe and separating the flowers from the glasses, she orchestrated a dialogue between familiar objects and imagery that would otherwise be overlooked. Each panel relates to the others in *Stills From a Life* 29, just as each work in the larger series responds to what came before and what comes after. This work mirrors the connectivity that drives Nash’s sequential works as well as the value she finds in the personal and professional communities that ultimately inspired the construction of the work. This leftover from quilting and textile art’s communal history and tradition is translated in experimental and imaginative ways in her work and process. While a textile sensibility is widespread among artists working with textile techniques or materials, and connects fiber artists
across time and space, it is also specific to each individual artist and their creative interpretation of the communities of ideas and aesthetics they carry with them.

**Dominie Nash’s Textile Sensibility**

Nash’s unique textile sensibility and its connection to ideas of community, history, and memory exists, in part, through the tangible histories embedded in the materials and ideas she has used throughout her career trajectory. She created some of her early series’, such as

![Figure 3.4 - Dominie Nash, *Impromptu 5*, 2006](image)

![Figure 3.5 - Dominie Nash, *Impromptu 6*, 2006](image)

*Impromptu*, *Deconstruction/Reconstruction*, and *Red Landscape*, around a variety of themes in composition and construction; in all of these, she used available materials and experimented with color, especially what she describes as “quantities of color” and their interactions with each other. *Impromptu* (Figures 3.4-3.5), for example, utilized leftovers of test cloths from previous
printed projects, while in *Deconstruction/Reconstruction*, Nash cut up and recombined old quilts with which she wasn’t initially satisfied. Works from the *Red Landscape* series (Figures 3.6-3.7) all contained red fabric and were based on details of the first piece in the series. Nash used a similar idea in another early series, but specifically based each piece on the slides of other works’ details:

I was looking at them on a friend’s light table to choose something for a show, and she said, “Those are neat pieces. I don’t think I’ve ever seen those.” I said, “Those are the details.” Some of the compositions that I had cut out for details were actually more interesting than the original piece, so I made a series, but they were abstract so you couldn’t tell what they had been.137

In this way, Nash’s textile sensibility is aesthetically tied to community through quilt genealogies, which respond to the available resources of her textile library, the fabrics others have given to her, the ideas that connect each piece in a series, as well as the spontaneity of fabric.

![Figure 3.6 - Dominie Nash, Red Landscape 1, 2001](image)
Many of her early abstract works, along with the Big Leaf series (Figures 3.8-3.9), are strategically spontaneous and composed around the piecing together of fabrics. Nash allows the media to guide her compositions or lets the design collages emerge on their own. She challenges herself to not buy new fabrics and to make do with what she has on hand, and this ultimately inspires new creations that might not have come about if she regularly used new materials. Furthermore, when asked how she decides on the size of her works, she explained

138 This spontaneity of fabric indirectly responds to the ideology of “subject and substance” central to the art quilt movement. While some art quilters became more interested in content, rather than material or technique, thus introducing new political and aesthetic attitudes into their work, artists working in other mediums began to recognize the potential of craft and especially textiles for sophisticating or diversifying their own work. See Sider, Pioneering Quilt Artists, 86.

139 Nash has accumulated an expansive archive of fabrics over the years, including old textiles given to her from friends and family and fabrics she has dyed or printed. By using these in her works, each piece conveys a history of her work and demonstrates the spontaneous approach evident to some degree in all of her projects. To build up her initial collection of fabrics, Nash used a variety of hand-dyeing
simply, “It just tells me.” She may envision some works as big and others as smaller, but often times the textiles she finds dictate how large the piece is.

Nash constructs her Big Leaf works, for example, based on the size and shape of the leaves, which ultimately determine the size of the screen she can use. She will print works or dye fabrics, store them away, and pull them back out years later because the size or style suits a current project. Printing several leaves on the same screen allows her to create a series of pieces that are in some way married to each other because of the original size and leaf design. Each case is different; some works are led more by her initial conception of the piece, others are determined completely by the textiles, and many of them fall somewhere between as she continues to modify each work and find pieces of fabric from her library to draw things together. Nash says that certain scraps of fabric jump out at her when she is working on a piece, and it evolves from there: “Sometimes I’ve done something and I had no idea what to do with it. And then it turns out to be the perfect thing for something I’m working on much later.”

Stills From a Life requires more planning and structure on paper before moving onto fabric, but still utilizes a collage-like process that is somewhat unstructured and reliant on photos, drawings, fabrics, and ideas leftover from previous projects. Nash’s earliest works in the series were based on arranged sets of objects captured at different angles in the conventional still life manner. Today, however, she draws on photographs of her studio, home, or other places she has visited as the basis of her compositions. She may focus on subject matter in the photos as techniques, and was especially interested in the uneven surfaces and colorations achieved using methods such as immersion dyeing, shibori, tie-dye, and painting techniques. She also enjoys the effects of discharge dyeing, or taking a dark fabric and using chemicals to remove the color, and their visual similarities to surfaces and textures in nature, such as reflections in water or rock patterns. Nash has used a variety of screen, block, and mono printing techniques, as well as fabric pastels and markers to create designs and patterns or echo stitching lines on her compositions. As she explains, “any way I can get pigment or dye on fabric, I’ve experimented with.” See Nash, interview, 2001.
Figure 3.8 - Dominic Nash, *Big Leaf 25*, 2010

Figure 3.9 - Dominic Nash, *Big Leaf 33*, ca. 2010-11
inspiration, but she is also interested in the relationship between objects and their details and shadows. From there, she alters the pictures, cropping them or zooming in on certain features, and rearranges them from different angles, occasionally taking out details and repositioning them to make compositions she finds pleasing. Sometimes she draws on top of the photos or adds scraps of fabric to figure out her color story: “I don’t have a good sense of things in space and sizes relative to other sizes… I have this composition and if I don’t draw it out and make a pattern, I find, ‘Oh, I don’t have room for this lovely pitcher,’ and it just falls off the edge. So it’s just kind of a practical thing.”

Nash considers the stitching portion of the process to be the most spontaneous aspect, even for the quilts that she has planned out in greater detail. After collaging on paper and overlapping and pinning pieces of fabric to create the compositions, she sews everything together using a mix of machine and hand stitching. She also uses thread to add subtler details throughout, such as in the swirling lines of *Stills From a Life* 29. She prefers to let the thread meander in unexpected ways and also enjoys the textural quality of leaving edges raw, which allows her to make changes later on, if necessary.140

This appreciation for spontaneity carries into how Nash presents her work as well. Her most recent pieces have non-specific titles based on the series rather than any particular subject matter, which allows the viewer to bring their own associations to each work. By avoiding making her wall hangings a “one line song,” in her words, Nash hopes that viewers can return to a piece multiple times and see things they hadn’t noticed before.141 While she remains open to the ideas and references that each viewer brings with them from their own geographical, cultural,
and aesthetic communities, her art is also a product of the communities to which she belongs and their accumulation in her own textile sensibility.

Relationships and communities in Nash’s life mirror those in her practice in a wide variety of ways. She maintains close professional and personal ties to artists in her studio, New Image Artists, and Quilt Art and recognizes universal qualities of a textile sensibility in these and other groups. While these networks suggest a connection to the historical tradition of quilting and the importance of community within it, her artistic practice illuminates the expanding category of textile art and multiple trunks from which it grows. The content of Nash’s art, especially that in *Stills From a Life*, responds to both her immediate surroundings, the spaces she shares with friends and colleagues, and the material and visual culture that populate these places. Rather than utilize patterns and quilting techniques passed between quilters for centuries, her particular interpretation of a textile sensibility extends beyond artists working with textiles. In the process, it expands understandings of community and their relationship to textile art in general. Nash provokes questions concerning what might happen if, for example, viewers and scholars thought more about art in terms of composition rather than focusing so strongly on historical context, categorization, and imaginaries of community as starting points. To begin, Nash suggests we “[s]tart at the same place looking at it. Is it a good composition? Is it interesting? What does it tell me? I’m not worried about what it is, but we’re a ways from that.”

**Conclusion**

This chapter explored Dominie Nash’s art, practices, communities, and experiences between the contemporary art and traditional quilt worlds as a lens through which to consider the reception of art quilts/quilts as art and its relationship to ideas and imaginaries of community. To
begin, the quilt paradox leans heavily on expectations and assumptions of community and their historical ties to femininity, domesticity, and handicraft, which haunt and flatten the reception of textile artists. Because of quilts’ historical connections to women and the home, they carry the baggage of how women’s work has historically been defined in contrast to men’s work. Conventions accompanying the medium of textiles continue to haunt artists working in and between both contemporary art and quilting worlds, and variations in many textile artists’ aesthetic and ideological means of addressing issues of hierarchy and categorization correspond to tensions between quilting tradition, history, and innovation. Some artists find meaning in remaining close to that history. Others choose to leave it behind entirely. Still others find their work somewhere in between, but all are better understood as members of multiple connected networks or communities rather than along exclusive or reductive terms.

In contrast to the quilt paradox, textile sensibilities speak to the immediate, far-reaching, tangible, and abstract manifestations of community in textile artists’ lives and work. They are both universal among artists working with fabric or quilting techniques and personal to each artist’s practice. Nash’s inspiration, for example, springs from a multitude of creative sources, networks, and communities both within and beyond the medium of textiles. Her textile sensibility within the Stills From a Life series, in particular, illuminates community as an aesthetic theme and presents a metaphor for community within her life and practice.

Community, in this broader context, shares many of the possibilities of tradition that Chris Luther’s Bridge Bowl opened up. The lure of community based on historical rather than contemporary context—as seen in both textile and traditional pottery communities—tends to reduce the importance of creative networks outside of artists’ immediate communities, whether based on geography or choice in medium. Similar to tradition, community may reference a
specific starting point, but relies on expansive and dynamic networks, whether they are
ideologically, aesthetically, personally, or professionally important. Both chapters one and two
focused on the importance of object-driven understandings of tradition and community, while
integrating the voice of the artists to clarify and augment contemporary definitions of these
terms. The next chapter confronts questions of tradition and community with the addition of
voice as a crucial concept in need of greater clarification and expansion within the fields of
visual and material culture. I consider the work of an unknown contemporary of Nash and
Luther, called the Philadelphia Wireman, for whom we have no audible or written voice. The
lack of available identity and context for the artist requires a closer focus on the works and their
reception, and an interrogation of the tendency among other voices to confine rather than liberate
the art maker.
CHAPTER 3.
(DIS)ASSEMBLING THE MANY VOICES OF THE PHILADELPHIA WIREMAN

Introduction: Discovery

One evening between 1978 and 1979, a young designer named Robert Leitch was driving home on Juniper Street in Center City Philadelphia, when the headlights of his car reflected off of a pile of metal objects. Stopping to take a closer look, he found nearly twelve hundred wire-bound sculptures stashed in cardboard boxes, as if they were left there hastily. These compact sculptures (Figures 4.1-4.2), only four and a half inches in height and composed of multiple independent parts repetitively and tightly wrapped, was one of those objects. Fragments of thick teal and orange electrical wire, a scratched and bent piece of ladder-shaped red plastic, a thick flat head screw, an aluminum can pull tab, a blue metal tag, and pieces of crumpled plastic wrapping, among other materials, are hidden in the interior of the work, all bound by silver wire. Two wires are tightly twisted together in some areas, while others are wrapped fewer times in more of an overarching manner. The most distinctive feature, the empty 1970s Dentyne Dynamints container, is secured with only three wire wraps. Mounted on a metal stand,

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142 This account is taken from the few lengthy sources on the artist. In all three cases, the information comes directly from John Ollman, with little to no direct communication with the finder Bob Leitch, except through Ollman. I therefore approach all of these accounts with some degree of skepticism. To me, even the notion that the objects were created in Philadelphia is to be questioned. Mike McGonigal, “Psychic Magnets: Ruminations on the Philadelphia Wireman and the Nature of the Fetish Object,” Raw Vision 5 (1992): 49-50; Brendan Greaves, “Bare Wires: Transmissions for the Philadelphia Wireman,” in Philadelphia Wireman (Minneapolis: Published for the Fleisher/Ollman Gallery by Shapco Printing, 2011), 62-3; Ann Jarmusch, “Wired for Art,” Philadelphia Inquirer, July 19, 1986.
Figure 4.1 - The Philadelphia Wireman, *Untitled (Dynamints, Red Wire Bolt and Nut)*, ca. 1970
(Photo source: Matthew Marks Gallery)

Figure 4.2 - The Philadelphia Wireman, *Untitled (Dynamints, Red Wire Bolt and Nut)*, ca. 1970
(Photo source: Matthew Marks Gallery)
exhibited, and purchased, this sculpture documents the voices of its discoverer, dealers, curators, collectors, and other viewers, yet the unknown identity of its maker denies easy explanation.

Details surrounding the discovery of these sculptures remain uncertain and the lack of information altogether warrants a new translation of these works. Rather than pick up where others left off in trying to discover who this artist was, this chapter considers what previous translations of the works reveal about alterity and the foregrounded, often unarticulated yet naturalized political, social, and cultural power from which it originates. The narratives and assertions surrounding the works of this artist, who came to be known as the Philadelphia Wireman, suggest more about their interpreters and the unresolved drive to inscribe, construct, and commoditize identity than they do about the potential artist. For this reason, I focus closely on the question of voice and how, in the absence of a maker’s voice, other voices have restrained rather than accumulated possibilities for the artist. I investigate these translations of the Philadelphia Wireman works, how they correspond to established practices of constructing, romanticizing, and/or exoticizing an artist and their work both within and beyond the self-taught and outsider art market, and how they have irrevocably influenced the ways in which viewers interpret the objects.

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Robert Leitch packed as many of these sculptures into his car as possible, salvaging the rest over subsequent days before they could be taken, sold for scrap, or dumped. He kept the works in storage for over five years, occasionally taking them out to decorate his home or give away. In 1984, two friends of Leitch and employees at Philadelphia’s Janet Fleisher Gallery, now the Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, convinced Leitch to bring roughly half of the works for

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143 See introductory chapter for discussion of alterity and how I am defining it.
appraisal by gallery director John Ollman. Remembering his first encounter with the objects, Ollman explains, “It’s impossible to express how exciting it was to see these objects for the first time—their raw, twisted metal, pierced with nails, immediately evoked power and magic.”

Ollman immediately responded to something he saw as exceptional in the small sculptures, declaring them the most important discovery of an unknown twentieth-century urban outsider artist. Leitch attributed his findings to a combination of luck and his “art-school-educated eye.”

After unsuccessful attempts to locate and identify the maker, Ollman and others at the gallery created a provisional biography for the artist based on their reception of the works and the details of their discovery. They claimed that the “Philadelphia Wireman”—the name they attached to the works—was African American because the objects were allegedly found in an historically African American neighborhood in Philadelphia. Yale University professor and African art expert Robert Farris Thompson substantiated their claims by confirming the sculptures’ possible lineage to African American iterations of West African spirit objects, namely nkisi, thereby attaching a religious dimension to the artist’s speculative biography. The works have since appeared in a variety of exhibitions of African American, outsider, and self-taught art, solidifying their associations with these communities as well as nkisi and other related traditions. This is evidenced in exhibition reviews since 1985, as well as a variety of literary, comic, and other artistic responses since 2001. While some of these translations of the

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145 Jarmusch, “Wired for Art.”

Philadelphia Wireman demonstrate a genuine interest in the sculptures themselves, their interpretations are commonly filtered through the narrative of the works’ discovery, fascination with the Philadelphia Wireman’s unknown origins, as well as the artist’s speculative biography. In the absence of an artist’s voice, the Philadelphia Wireman’s history became the product of certain voices of artistic “authority” speaking louder than others.

The invented biography of the Philadelphia Wireman continues to be reified through repetition and embellishment, and the sculptures have become less and less able to shed their earliest interpretations. One example of this is a review of the 2010 Philadelphia Wireman exhibition at the William Shearburn Gallery in St. Louis, in which art critic Jessica Baran described the sculptures as exuding “a kind of maniacal dedication to their self-authored craft—part-scavenging, part-bundling, fastidiously circled innumerable times with rounds of wire. Displayed upright like petite figures, they appear tribal, fetishistic or like reliquaries to the toss-away stuff of dailiness.” She continues, “[They] deny all common senses of purpose, pleasure and nameable source. Rather, they’re all immediacy and earnestness—the material manifestation of the mysterious compulsion that made them.”

In her description of the works, Baran perpetuates the asserted racial, spiritual, and creative identity of the Philadelphia Wireman by retaining stereotypes of primitivism regularly attached to African, African American, self-taught, and/or outsider artists. In qualifiers such as “fetishistic” and “tribal,” along with the suggestion of an extreme mental state through phrases such as “maniacal dedication” and “mysterious compulsion,” and charismatic religious devotion in describing the works as “reliquaries,” Baran

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147 In the introduction, I borrowed Bernard Herman’s definition of translation as “making the alien familiar” as well as “making the familiar strange.”

reiterates narrative tropes of the outsider art market, in which artists are often characterized by multiple diagnoses, one of which is mental illness. In this and other cases, fixations with alterity, especially through the narrating of oddities and difference, have long overshadowed the artworks and in many cases, the artist’s voice.

An important critical concept for framing this reception comes from New Materialist scholar Jane Bennett and her de(human)-centering theory of assemblages. She defines assemblages as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts... living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within.” Bennett borrows Bruno Latour’s term actant to refer to these energies or “[sources] of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events.” In this way, an agent, or actant, never acts alone, but their agency always depends on the collaboration, both conscious and unconscious, of many bodies and forces, both human and nonhuman.

Bennett’s theory of assemblages provides a framework for understanding the network of pieces making up each assemblage-like Wireman sculpture. For the purposes of this chapter, however, identifying these sculptures as forces within larger groupings of both human and nonhuman agents also illuminates how this art is circulated, received, and interpreted for particular ends. The assemblage that is the reception of the Philadelphia Wireman, then, includes not only the works, but also all the human agents—the discoverer, gallery owners, scholars,

149 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, viii.

150 Her project primarily deals with the relationship between material things and human, rather than nonhuman animals. She aims to “turn the figures of ‘life’ and ‘matter’ around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange... In the space created by this estrangement, a vital materiality can start to take place.” Bennett, Vibrant Matter, vii, 21-4.
critics, artists, and other viewers, including myself—as well as our translations of the works. Drawing on this idea later in the chapter, I consider the crowd-sourcing practices evident in creative responses to the Philadelphia Wireman sculptures, and propose a method of translating art that emphasizes reflexivity and transparency and ultimately, a crowd sourcing of art’s reception.

Previous translations of the Philadelphia Wireman have strayed too far from the objects themselves because of the incessant impulse to locate the human—including the cultural community or tradition that he/she/they embody—in order to interpret the works. This impulse responds to what Bennett describes as nonidentity or “a presence that acts upon us.” Referencing Theodor Adorno’s definition of nonidentity, she explains, “[W]e knowers are haunted, he says, by a painful, nagging feeling that something’s being forgotten or left out. This discomfiting sense of the inadequacy of representation remains no matter how refined or analytically precise one’s concepts become.” 151 While Adorno believed we should merely accept that life will always exceed our knowledge and control, that is, accept the impossibility of “reconcilement,” Bennett suggests that we focus more on recognizing human participation in a shared, vital materiality: “The ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it.” 152 Bennett’s approach accounts for the more powerful and important role of objects beyond being tools or things made and used by human agents.

The Philadelphia Wireman objects, however, are treated solely as empty containers to be filled with the voices of their many translators, and the narrative of the artist takes on a life of its own as it circulates within and around other translations of the art and artist. In this way, the

151 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 14.
152 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 14.
objects’ affect and agency depend on a perceived nonexistence of vitality and moment of emptiness. In the absence of the artist’s voice, the voices of John Ollman and Robert Farris Thompson—the early interpreters of the works—along with their contextualizing frames for the Wireman, continue to influence how people receive the work today. This process illuminates the methods by which people interpret objects either alone, in cultural context, or in the invented context described here. Ollman, Thompson, and others’ interests in the Wireman works and impulses to locate some kind of identity for the artist are not so different from the inclinations that bring any of us to translate art through contextualization. However, their work reveals a largely unexamined set of practices that could grow with respect to reflexivity, transparency, and more fluid understandings of identity, community, and tradition.

In the introduction to this project, I described flattening, centering, and haunting as central processes of categorization and canon formation tied closely to issues of alterity and otherness. Flattening references methods of categorization that reduce and simplify our understanding of artists and processes of accumulating knowledge more broadly. Centering refers firstly to the ways in which we, as humans, position ourselves within scholarly inquiry and secondly to the ways in which we tend to center human identity or embodiment in our contextualization and study of art. Haunting, in this project, refers to the imaginaries that, in response to previous histories, realities, or ideas, continue to haunt the ways in which artists are received by way of their perceived affiliation with certain mediums, traditions, communities, and cultural backgrounds.

In the previous two chapters, I interrogated reductive and outdated perceptions of tradition and community, and re-evaluated the terms’ potential for understanding the multifaceted and complex means through which artists navigate the canons and margins of the
contemporary art world. In many ways, the compulsion to locate a cultural and creative community and tradition for the Philadelphia Wireman is even stronger than for Chris Luther and Dominie Nash because of the perpetual uncertainty surrounding the works. Where Luther and Nash’s voices provided more nuanced contextualization of their works beyond flattened and haunted ideas of tradition and community, the Wireman questions the necessity and efficacy of locating a human-centered community, tradition, and identity altogether.

By illuminating the previously imbalanced, human-centered exchange between the Philadelphia Wireman works and their translators, I ultimately aim, perhaps impossibly, to move beyond the discovery narrative and speculative biography that haunts the artwork. Each translation I consider has a uniquely varied relationship with the works and response to the narratives surrounding the Philadelphia Wireman, some more object-centered than others. Up to this point, however, no extensive translation has removed the works completely from their discovery and the proposed identity of the artist. Because much of this chapter involves closely looking at these previous translations and the few written sources on the artist, I focus on voice and where voices interpreting and translating the Philadelphia Wireman have responded to others. I aim to expand interpretations of the Wireman beyond the exoticized and reductive portrayal that haunts and flattens the art, and develop understandings of the relationships between people and things.

**Primitivism and Fetishism**

The rhetoric and ideologies embedded in the Philadelphia Wireman’s reception, including those of *primitivism* and *fetishism*, parallel those in the reception of self-taught, outsider, folk, African American, and other, especially non-western art. Importantly,
primitivism—a product of essentialism and colonialism—describes a set of relationships, rather
than a category of its own; often, the “primitive” is the “other” to “civilized.” As defined by Bill
Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, essentialism is “the assumption that groups,
categories or classes of objects have one or several defining features exclusive to all members of
that category.” Related to colonialism, essentialism supported the belief in an essential
inferiority of the colonial subject, and settler colonial perceptions of the “primitive” in native
populations, including qualities such as “tribal,” “wild,” “savage,” or “uncivilized,” justified the
transformation, domination, and exploitation of native cultures and resources as part of a
perceived “necessary civilizing process” by modern imperial states.

As Charles W. Mills explains in The Racial Contract, perceptions of race were also
central to molding an ideology of primitivism in the white settler state, which differentially
privileged whiteness through the exploitation of non-white bodies, land, and resources, and
continues to privilege whiteness through the denial of socioeconomic opportunities:

White men who are (definitionally) already part of society encounter non-whites who are
not, who are “savage” residents of a state of nature characterized in terms of wilderness,
jungle, wasteland… the natives are usually characterized as “barbarians” rather than
“savages,” their state of nature being somewhat farther away (though not, of course, as
remote and lost in the past—if it ever existed in the first place—as the Europeans’ state of
nature).

In the context of twentieth-century western culture, primitivism also involved the
paradoxical celebration of non-western art by way of appropriating what artists and collectors
perceived as “simple,” “timeless,” and “lacking in sophistication”—rhetoric that parallels the

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contemporary reception of folk, vernacular, self-taught, and outsider art. This was especially the case when western culture was thought to be “too civilized” and needing renewal through contact with societies that they perceived to be in an earlier stage of development. For example, many early-twentieth-century avant-garde artists’ critiques of western social and aesthetic order took the form of romanticized embraces of imagined timelessness, primitiveness, authenticity, and tribal life as opposed to the “decadent” West. Patricia Leighten and Mark Antliff discuss Pablo Picasso’s famous Les Demoiselles d’Avignon as an example of this:

[W]hereas the cultural artifact Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907) is described as the creation of a particular artist, Pablo Picasso, and a work that marks the historical emergence of a new art movement, Cubism, the creators of the various African masks said to have influenced Picasso in his treatment of his chosen subject remain anonymous, known only by their “tribal” or regional production. Failure to identify the individual creator of a mask is a way of denying that individual choices, including aesthetic ones, were a motivating factor in its production. No longer grounded in the historical specificity implied by categories of stylistic development or artistic biography, the mask becomes a free-floating signifier for the past, present, and future production of a given people, all of which remains unchanged.155

In their desire to subvert colonial prejudice, artists perpetuated the stereotypes from which that discrimination derived—a practice that continues today around non-canonical or non-western art. Antliff and Leighton’s suggestion of a “free-floating signifier” rather than “historical specificity” similarly relates to the paradox of categorizing non-canonical or non-western artists, who are

155 Furthermore, the “primitive” is also wrapped up in assumptions about gender and class. Pervasive associations between women, nature, and the primitive, for example, are based on the belief that unlike men, women are less cultured and lack the ability to act on or regulate nature rather than simply be moved by it. Furthermore, whereas mental instability among male artists has been considered an important component of their capacity to create, it was believed that women could not channel their madness into creative activities because their imaginative capacities were not regulated by intellect. This represents another outdated justification for the Wireman’s gender distinction. Antliff and Leighton, “Primitive,” 218-25.
specified or categorized by non-specificity. In this way, their reception contains another parallel
to those of the amorphous category of “folk,” “self-taught,” “outsider,” and “vernacular art.”

In the case of the Philadelphia Wireman, among others, *primitivism* is connected to
ideologies of *fetishism*, which respond to the marking, reducing, and displacing difference or
otherness. *Fetishism* originally referenced what nineteenth-century anthropologist E. B. Tylor
saw as “the doctrine of spirits embodied in, or attached to, or conveying influence through,
certain material objects.” This early usage of “fetish” has lost favor with scholars of West
African *nkisi* in particular because in the historical accounts of these objects, it implied that the
makers were “too immature to perceive the world correctly” which “led them to the moral error,
in Christian opinion, of Idolatry.” More recent scholarship connects *fetishism* to *disavowal*, or
the ways in which “powerful fascination or desire is both *indulged* and at the same time
*denied*.” A fetish, by extension, is an object of powerful fascination, indulgence, and denial.

Both the historical and contemporary definitions of fetish are foregrounded and
perpetuated in the reception of the Philadelphia Wireman. Randall Morris of the Cavin-Morris
Gallery was so struck by what he perceived as a “ritualistic nature” in the works that he
originally named the artist the “Philadelphia Fetish Master” in the first exhibition of the works at
his gallery in New York. The Cavin-Morris Gallery and Janet Fleisher Gallery were sharing
artists between Philadelphia and New York at the time and exhibited several shows together

156 I outlined some of these qualities through Colin Rhodes’ work in the introductory chapter.


association with the Open University, 1997), 265-7.

159 Jarmusch, “Wired for Art”; Gary Alan Fine, *Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of
before and after the Wireman exhibition in 1985. While Cavin-Morris was the first gallery to incorporate the works into a curated exhibition, they were shown “in affiliation with” the Janet Fleisher Gallery, which had been showing, selling, and gifting the works prior to this. As Morris explains, “Our interests at the time had more to do with the cultural aspects of the field, and the wire pieces were right on that borderline we liked exploring between what seemed likely to be African American and art brut.”

John Ollman and Robert Farris Thompson specifically avoid the term “fetish” when referring to the Wireman because of its negative connotations and connections to primitivism. They renamed the artist from “Fetish Master” to “Wireman” in the works’ second exhibition at the Janet Fleisher Gallery. However, their assertions about the Philadelphia Wireman’s identity exemplify the underlying ideology of primitivism and ultimately affect the reception of the works by other viewers and critics. “Fetish” or related words such as “talisman,” “relic,” or “charm” are used explicitly in descriptions of the Philadelphia Wireman works, and primitivism or mysticism is similarly implied through evocations of the art’s psychic power. In this fraught example of the narrative process that regularly happens within the marketing of self-taught and outsider artists, or artists characterized in a variety of ways as “other,” the Philadelphia Wireman’s biography has become a fetish of what many consider a fetish object.

Translations of the Philadelphia Wireman bridge two worlds of artistic reception—that of self-taught and outsider art, and that of African American, particularly “vernacular” or “folk” art.

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160 The Cavin-Morris Gallery has represented artists “from all the major regions of the world,” which they perceive as “authentic and visionary,” “unusual and formally surprising,” and that “extend the continuum established by the self-taught and Tribal artists.” Cavin-Morris Gallery, accessed February 9, 2018, http://www.cavinmorris.com/; Randall Morris, e-mail message to author, February 5, 2018.

161 In 1987, Thompson argued that the time when the artist could be “trivialized by categorization (‘naïve,’ ‘primitive’) has passed.” See: Thompson, “People of the World,” 61.
The story of the Philadelphia Wireman and its ties to ideologies of primitivism and fetishism reveal strong parallels between these two worlds, especially around the time of the works’ alleged discovery. Importantly, the trailblazing 1982 exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, *Black Folk Art in America: 1930-1980* preceded the first exhibition of the Philadelphia Wireman by only three years. The close chronology of the two shows, along with the surge in exhibitions of African American art following the Corcoran show and an even earlier exhibition at the Los Angeles County Art Museum, *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, reflected both broader interests in African American art in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and increasing efforts to insert African American folk, self-taught, and outsider art, in particular, into canons of fine art.

*Black Folk Art in America* initially received a largely positive response in the American press, though some reviewers were critical of curators Jane Livingston and John Beardsley’s distinctions between *fine* and *folk* art and their ties to race. Many major city museums had never exhibited African American folk or vernacular art at such a large scale, and reviewers agreed that *Black Folk Art in America* was an important first step toward amending this. In her review of the exhibition catalog, Mary Cowen acknowledged the curators’ important efforts to bring the work of unknown African American artists to public attention, but also challenged the distinctions they made between trained and folk artists, arguing that this paradox is one we will live with as long as art continues to be compartmentalized.162 Her observations echoed other responses to *Black Folk Art in America*; while many exhibition reviews emphasized the artists’ apparent isolation and distance from academic traditions, celebrating the works as “raw,” “aggressive,” and “intentionally crude,” others rightly critiqued the repeated emphasis of these points and

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questioned the curators’ separation of folk and high art as emotional/visual versus intellectual/verbal.163

On a much larger scale, the exhibition also reinforced marginalizing divisions between “black” and “white” art engrained through centuries of racial discrimination and exploitation. In his response to the exhibition, Eugene Metcalf details the history of these divisions and their ties to larger systems of racial formation and social control, ultimately rooted in the denial of the agency of African American people—including their ability to produce art—because of what white enslavers perceived as an innate “primitiveness.”164 The curators of Black Folk Art in America were careful to avoid terms such as “primitive” in their arguing for a common “black” tradition among the artists in the exhibition. In her essay for the catalog, Regenia A. Perry claims that some of the pieces are racially identifiable by their subject matter while the majority belong to a “school of folk art” that is “distinctly and innately black American,” which she links to common aesthetic traits among the exhibited works.165 The curators’ attempts to connect works in the exhibition to both African traditions and folk art traditions of the rural South, however, are negated by their emphasis on individual artists’ geographical isolation, lack of formal training, and creative inspiration from dreams and visions—all common tropes used to define art as “folk”


or “outsider” in opposition to “fine” art. Despite the curators’ wishes to elevate rather than belittle or diminish the artists in the 1982 exhibition, the exploitative histories of African American art, folk art, and their ties to primitivism are difficult to shed. No artist’s reception illustrates this more clearly than the Philadelphia Wireman.

Creating and Receiving the Philadelphia Wireman

Acquisition

After bringing the works to the Janet Fleisher Gallery, Robert Leitch chose to remain anonymous in his lifetime. His motives for this are unknown, but conjectures include the possibility that he wanted to avoid the charges of fraud, opportunism, or exploitation directed toward many discoverers of self-taught and outsider art. His friends once teased him about the discovery of the works, suggesting “he could have perpetrated a hoax, given his own predilection for amassing found objects, by posing as the artist.” John Ollman has also on occasion been suspected of making the works as part of an elaborate scam. In response, he suggests that the need for answers—in this case, who the artist is—is a strange part of the contemporary art world. He says, “If you don’t have a name on something, it doesn’t really have value. I have never felt

166 I introduced many of these qualities in the introductory chapter.

that way about them. I wish I could put a name to them but I can’t. It’s not as if I didn’t try really hard.”

As Ollman suggests, personnel at the gallery attempted to track down the artist or any surviving relatives, friends, or neighbors who might have witnessed the making of some of the works. Under Ollman’s supervision, two thousand Xerox flyers were posted, an article was published in the local paper asking for information, and interested parties traversed the area, going door-to-door in the hopes of learning anything about the life of this artist. Gentrification was changing the landscape of the once historically African American neighborhood in which the works were allegedly found, and by the time folks went door-to-door inquiring about the wire sculptures, many of the families once living in the neighborhood had been displaced. There was little response to Ollman’s efforts; some who replied claimed to be or know the artist, but the works they produced apparently did not resemble the works of the artist being sought. As Ollman explains, “People came down to the gallery with small wire sculptures—little figures that were fishing, playing baseball, stuff like that. I even showed someone an actual Wireman and he laughed claiming we didn’t have the real Wireman.” In January of 2016, Ollman explained to Huffington Post arts writer Priscilla Frank that a visitor to the gallery in 1999 recognized the works and claimed to have seen a man building the objects on his stoop. The visitor correctly

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169 The relationship between the works, their reception, and gentrification is a topic worth further discussion in a future project.


recognized the street on which Leitch reported they were found and confirmed the artist’s identity as an African American man.\textsuperscript{172} Whoever the art maker is or was, he or she did not seek or require financial compensation, even after their works entered the public sphere through magazines, newspaper articles, and exhibitions.\textsuperscript{173}

**Corroboration**

The discovery narrative of the Philadelphia Wireman remains a central part of how the objects and artist are received. Rarely, however, is the narrative unaccompanied by speculations of the artist’s background, based on the initial curatorial and connoisseur-based assertions of John Ollman and Robert Farris Thompson. Perhaps the most universally assumed characteristic assigned to the Wireman is that the artist was male, on the basis of the “immense strength it would have taken to wrap these pieces with heavy-gauge wire,” and the scarce, though existent evidence of plier marks.\textsuperscript{174} Critics, scholars, collectors, and dealers have found less reason to challenge these claims than they have the artist’s African American ethnicity, but even this has been largely uncontested and unmediated.\textsuperscript{175} Ultimately, however, identifying with a particular


\textsuperscript{173} It has been suggested that the real artist might not have thought it worth it to come forward and claim ownership, due to the low market value of the works at the time and the difficulty in proving ownership considering the circumstances of the find, but there is no evidence to support these scenarios. After just two years of marketing the Philadelphia Wireman works in the mid-1980s, over half of the collection was sold, each work selling between $75 and $500 when they made their debut. The works sold between $300 and $700 in the mid-1990s, and by 2011, the works were selling from $2200 to $9000; Ollman, “Foreword,” 18-19; Jarmusch, “Wired for Art”; Lita Solis-Cohen and Sally Solis-Cohen, “Coming to terms with Outsider Art,” *Baltimore Sun*, March 14, 1993, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1993-03-14/features/1993073160_1_outsider-art-american-folk-art-museum-of-art; Greaves, “Bare Wires,” 60-2.

\textsuperscript{174} It goes without saying that this assumption is sexist and archaic. A quick Google search reveals the number of women artists working with wire. McGonigal, “Psychic Magnets,” 50.

\textsuperscript{175} Previous assumptions about the Philadelphia Wireman’s identity have been further elaborated through the works’ inclusion in exhibitions of African American and spiritual or religious art. In 1990, the
race or ethnicity is a trait better self-declared by an artist rather than used as an interpretive tool for their art. In the case of the Philadelphia Wireman, it reduces rather than liberates the maker and attaches the artist to creative traditions and communities that may have never been their intention or reality. It also situates them under marginalizing ideologies of primitivism, which is perpetuated through the fetishizing rhetoric of art critics writing about the work.

Robert Farris Thompson, considered by many to be an expert in African and African-Atlantic art, bears, with Ollman, the greatest responsibility for solidifying the Philadelphia Wireman’s identity as an African American man. Thompson connected the work of the Wireman to African-Atlantic traditions of ornamenting or wrapping objects to activate medicinal or other protective powers, which he traced from the streets of northern cities to the homes and yards of the Deep South, and even further to the Kongo tradition of *nkisi nkondi* (Figure 4.3). He argued that the Philadelphia Wireman sculptures represent a “fusion of two worlds, modern technocratic and traditional Kongo-American,” suggesting that the use of wrapped wire similarly hails from the practice of *zinkondi a mábika*, or possibly from traditional rural sources, “cognate with earlier expressions in Kongo-influenced South Carolina where a number of remarkable ceramic objects were made, with surfaces into which, *nkondi*-like, were embedded screws, ladles, shells, and so forth.” Thompson believed that the Wireman was “imbued with the power of master

Wireman works were shown in *Art of Healing: Objects of Magic* at the Janet Fleisher Gallery and in *Even the Deep Things of God* at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts; in 1992, they were shown in two group exhibitions with exclusively African American artists including Hawkins Bolden, Henry Ray Clark, and Purvis Young; that same year, the Dean Jensen Gallery in Milwaukee also showed them in an exhibition titled *Messaging the Spirit World*; in 1993, the works were exhibited in *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* at the Museum for African Art in New York; and more recently, in 2011 they were shown in an exhibition at the Maccarone Gallery in New York titled *The Medicine Bag*, implying their association with native spiritual healing and the containing of sacred objects. Other responses have connected the wire sculptures’ spiritual purposes to the nearby location of “Harry’s Occult Shop,” which stood a block from where the sculptures were allegedly found. Jacobs, *A World of Their Own*, 42; Edith Newhall, “A new look at the Wireman, and three solo shows,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 6, 2011; Greaves, “Bare Wires, 62; McGonigal, “Psychic Magnets,” 50.
Figure 4.3 – *Nkisi Nkondi*, Congo, ca. 1880-1920 (Photo source: Wikimedia Commons)
diarist and the insight of a messianic mind,” and in the artist’s fascination with binding and capturing objects that “light, bale, speak, let enter, bring luck, illume, wrap, shine, and close,” Thompson perceived a “whiff of Kongo.”  

John Ollman, who was the first to recognize physical similarities between *nkisi* and the Wireman works, similarly argued that the Philadelphia Wireman was aware of the African tradition of wrapping power objects, suggesting that the artist was likely “some sort of medicine man or shaman within the old black community… in some way … connected to African culture.” He continued, “I think these pieces were made for individuals, that somebody came to the Wireman to be healed, or for some similar purpose, and that he would create a piece specific to the individual.” Ollman also suggested that the artist might have been totally unaware of all these traditions, and the spiritual center of the objects may fall under the “mythic wellspring of humanity, the collective unconscious.”

In a review for *Outside Sculpture* at the Janet Fleisher Gallery in 1986, Philadelphia art critic Edward J. Sozanski similarly discussed a “metaphysical aura” of the Philadelphia Wireman sculptures that was, according to him, “so palpable one senses they are intended to recount a life, a story that probably will never be known.” In one of the few published essays on the

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176 According to Thompson, unlike traditional *nkisi nkondi* practices of attaching blades and screws to an object, the particular charm-making practice of *zinkondi a mābika* uses raffia ties and knotted cloth. The figures usually concern the realm of family problems, including marital conflicts and infertility. For example, if a couple is having difficulty conceiving a child, they will buy a *nkondi* figure directly from the maker, and leverage its spiritual power by vowing to each other and tying knots to the figure as symbols of their promise. If they keep their vows, the spirit embodied by the figure protects them and helps them conceive a child. If the vow is broken, however, they will be unprotected and at risk of great devastation, including death. In some creolized manifestations Thompson located in portions of the Americas, figures were tied or wrapped with wire or silk ribbons rather than raffia and cloth. Thompson, “People of the World,” 60-1.

177 McGonigal, “Psychic Magnets,” 52.

Philadelphia Wireman, entitled “Psychic Magnets: Ruminations on the Philadelphia Wireman and the Nature of the Fetish Object,” author Mike McGonigal also expressed an immediate reaction and desire to understand the works; he wondered if they were dolls made for a child or some ritual purpose by an artist living in a junkyard, or if they were the obsessive, “diaristic” figurines of a homeless person. He explains his reaction as one he experienced only once before, when looking at “shamanistic” Kwakiutl objects on display at the Museum of Natural History. He believed the Philadelphia Wireman works were “charged,” and had he actually touched one of them, something “spectacular and terrifying would happen”—here referencing ideas of conjuring, or magical traditions in which spiritual power is invoked for various purposes, and their assumed connection to African American religious practices.179

These translations of the Philadelphia Wireman suggest an immediate and psychic reaction to the works themselves, but they ultimately reify the discovery narrative and biography already established by Ollman and Thompson, in the process solidifying their positions of cultural authority. As is the case elsewhere in the marketing of self-taught and outsider art, the discovery, discoverer, and especially the dealer remain central parts of the Philadelphia Wireman’s reception. In Richard Polsky’s 2011 book, The Art Prophets: The Artists, Dealers, and Tastemakers Who Shook the Art World, he retells the story of the Philadelphia Wireman works’ discovery and Ollman, rather than Leitch’s expert eye. He receives the discovery and interpretation of the artist as an African American man as truth and believes that Ollman’s expertise as an art dealer helps determine this. Similar to the discovery of other outsiders such as

179 He is referring, I assume, to works in the Hall of Northwest Coast Indians. “Kwakiutl” is the name in the display given to the Kwakwaka’wakw Indians of Vancouver Island, though there appears to be no pieces used by a shaman in this tribe in the museum. He may actually be referring to objects from the Nootka (Nuu-chah-nulth) community; McGonigal, “Psychic Magnets,” 49; Yvonne Patricia Chireau, Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 12.
Henry Darger, Polsky believes that without “fortuitous rescue,” these works would have never entered the art world.\textsuperscript{180}

In spite of claims to the contrary, and suggestions that dealers have maintained that the value of the Philadelphia Wireman artworks transcend both biography and established provenance, the art is repeatedly not what is marketed. In 2011, John Ollman stated that “[w]hat matters most is the sculptures themselves. They are both modern and ancient, mysterious and revealing, raw and beautiful, challenging and satisfying. Almost immediately, they announce that they come from a place of deep spirituality.”\textsuperscript{181} Ollman argues that his response is to the objects rather than the artist’s speculative biography or discovery narrative. However, his interpretation of the art as “mysterious,” “raw,” and “spiritual” inscribes an identity of the artist.\textsuperscript{182}

\textbf{Exhibition}

These fixations with the discovery and biography of the Philadelphia Wireman reveal the dual fetishization of art and artists deemed “other” in some way. If given only one sentence in an exhibition review, critics generally refer to the Philadelphia Wireman’s discovery narrative or the works’ fetish-like qualities. In a review of the 1993 \textit{ Outsider Art Fair} in New York, critics Lita and Sally Solis-Cohen acknowledge the interest in the incomplete story of the Philadelphia

\textsuperscript{180} Polsky, \textit{The Art Prophets}, 81-102.

\textsuperscript{181} Ollman, “Foreword,” 19; Greaves, “Bare Wires,” 63.

\textsuperscript{182} The term “raw” is particularly ubiquitous in the field of \textit{art brut} and self-taught and outsider art. John Maizel’s editorial statement of the first issue of \textit{Raw Vision} in 1989, for example, recognizes this “raw” work as “the purest and most direct form of artistic creation,” which has often “disturbed by its directness and power…” He explains, “Whatever its form and wherever it is found, a common thread exists; an art produced by inner compulsion, with no regard for commercial considerations or art convention and fashions.” John Maizels, “Editorial,” Historic Archive Reprint of \textit{Raw Vision’s} First Three Issues (December 2005): 10.
Wireman, and mention the anecdotal marketing techniques of self-taught and outsider art dealers in general:

[I]t was hard to discern whether people were buying the art or the anecdotes. Dealers were anxious to tell how their artists lost their jobs and started making things out of found objects, how they lived in a school bus, or drew for hours responding to the voice of God. Others recounted hospital therapists channeling artists’ creativity onto canvas.\textsuperscript{183}

Similarly, in her review of the 2015 New York \textit{Outsider Art Fair}, Martha Schwendener explains, “Despite many changes in the outsider world, diagnosis still reigns. You’re often told, when you inquire about artists, that they were autistic, schizophrenic or developmentally disabled.”\textsuperscript{184}

Outsider art has slowly been making its way into the mainstream contemporary art scene, yet fetishization remains standard practice.

Translations of the Philadelphia Wireman further illuminate parallels between the reception of both outsider and African American art, all formulated under ideologies of primitivism and fetishism previously discussed. One early translation of the Philadelphia Wireman works—their inclusion in the 1994 exhibition, \textit{Dream Singers, Story Tellers: An African-American Presence}—similarly illustrates this point, while providing some compelling ideas around \textit{community} and \textit{tradition}, tied to visual qualities of the art rather than their makers. \textit{Dream Singers, Story Tellers} brought together the work of both mainstream and self-taught, or “visionary” artists around shared visual languages and aesthetic strategies, divided into seven

\textsuperscript{183} Solis-Cohen, “Coming to terms with Outsider Art.”

core groups. The curators organized the Philadelphia Wireman works under the category of “The Poetics of Accumulation,” alongside the art of Melvin Edwards, Lonnie Holley, and William T. Williams. Unlike the “subtractive” approach of artists in the prior category, “The Poetics of Economy,” their works all seemed to blend the past and present and demonstrate an “addictive approach” through the “layering and accretion of line and form, substance and material, reference and narrative.” Essays in the exhibition catalog draw on these categories as types of aesthetic communities among African American artists. I remain skeptical of assumptions related to an inherently “African American aesthetic”—especially in dialogue with the Philadelphia Wireman, for whom racial identity is uncertain—but some of the authors’ ideas are more nuanced on this point than others.

In his essay for the exhibition catalog, Michael Brenson argues that the show revealed the centrality of African American artists to contemporary American art, regardless of style or medium. He discusses the presence of an “African American community” in which artists’ similarities are greater than their differences. Importantly, Brenson also acknowledges the

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186 Curator Alison Weld parallels the visual qualities of accumulation and enigma in the works of Edwards and Williams with that of the Philadelphia Wireman. She also quotes Robert Farris Thompson in suggesting their visual likeness to the Kongo tradition of nkisi while pointing to similarities in the practices of modern and contemporary artists, especially the Abstract Expressionists’ interest in “transmitting their emotional struggles to the canvas.” Weld presumes that the Wireman was African American because of the alleged location of the works’ discovery, but retains her belief that their attribution may be questioned and their underlying motivation must remain elusive. Weld, Dream Singers, Story Tellers, 41-5.

187 Brenson touches on a shared attention to spirituality and religion in the show as well, suggesting the exhibition’s pantheism and the shared belief in “art as a magical agent of social and spiritual transformation.” He continues, “I can’t think of a single artist in the show who does not feel he or she is serving a cause larger than himself or herself.” Michael Brenson, “The Pressure of Voices,” in Dream Singers, Story Tellers: An African-American Presence, ed. Alison Weld and Sadao Serikawa (Fukui-shi: Fukui Kenritsu Bijutsukan, 1992), 6-7.
potential shortcomings of the idea of community, reminding readers of its overuse in America, assumption of group belonging based on race, religion, gender, sexual preference, or nationality, and its potential honoring of group thinking over independent mind—as illustrated through the previous chapter on Dominie Nash and imaginaries of community. He questions who it is that decides what group thinking should be or what the community is, and clarifies that each community and individual artist in the show makes up a multitude of communities, with no means of measuring or mapping where one begins and another ends.  

The catalog essay by James Smalls relatedly interrogates claims about what separates the art in the exhibition as “African American,” recalling troubling histories of the “division between us and them.” He argues, however, that the exhibition was not about race or these divisions, but rather, cultural continuities and understanding. It prompted questions, rather than answers concerning the “multiracial and multihistorical condition.” While Smalls powerfully articulates the potential problems with distinguishing artists along racial lines, he also relies heavily on previous translations of the Philadelphia Wireman as an African American artist as well as the fetishizing rhetoric used to explain the artworks. He describes them as “curiosities…

[m]eticulous filamental wrappings of found urban detritus resembling atomic structures, the

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188 Brenson sites Lorna Simpson’s work as especially important in exposing racial and sexual differences and stereotypes and resisting any notion that any kind of identity is fixed. Brenson, “The Pressure of Voices,” 7-8.

works powerfully convey an internal, cocoon-like energy and force.” Smalls also notes the enigmatic origin of these works as adding to their mystery and appeal, quoting Ollman and Thompson’s description of the artist’s awareness of African traditions of wrapping power objects and the sculpture’s purposes as twentieth-century talismans or spiritual charms: “They remain powerful works that, in content and purpose, effectively blend elements from African and American cultures.”190 Smalls also describes a “quality of obsessiveness” in the works’ construction, especially in the ways in which the binding material, whether it is wire, rubber bands, or colored paper strips, moves in and out of the other urban materials in “intricate maneuvers.” Furthermore, he believes that the everyday materials evident in the works connect humans to a cultural and spiritual history. In both the Wireman works and those of Lonnie Holley, for example, Smalls sees the creative process as equally important to the product itself, and similarly interprets a “ritualistic or fetishistic quality” in both their work.191

*Dream Singers, Story Tellers* illuminates the potential to create powerful connections between African American history and contemporary life and locate them in shared visual vocabularies, but the exhibition was not without its flaws, including its reliance on assumptions about the Philadelphia Wireman’s racial identity and the rhetoric of previous translations of the sculptures. However, the curators attempted to move beyond pigeonholing artists according to their race by discussing the wide variety of aesthetic similarities and differences in the included works, and the ways in which community operates as both a valuable and challenging tool. The curators and catalog contributors compare the artists and works in the exhibition based on their

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190 Smalls, “Food for Thought,” 80.

191 Smalls, “Food for Thought,” 80.
perception of shared visual alphabets and means of transforming objects and images between artists.

In the Philadelphia Wireman works, along with those by Lonnie Holley, Thornton Dial Sr., and Benny Andrews, James Smalls perceived similar themes of “recycling as a human renewal process.” The exhibition’s categorical theme of “The Poetics of Accumulation” similarly brought together these artists’ shared use of layering and accretion, whether of lines, forms, substances, materials, references, or narratives. In each case, the artists blended the past with the present using found objects, each imbedded with their own histories. As Smalls describes, “Transcending their materials, these objects engage us in a dialogue, making us aware of contemporary history and the individual’s place in it.” Through recycled images, ideas, or objects, the concept of “reuse,” Smalls argues, is an established creative practice within some African American cultures. Linked with both past and contemporary notions of rebirth, it serves utilitarian purposes and communicates personal, cultural, and social experiences.

The curators connect these objects to personal, communal, and political memories specific to African Americans, but the evocations of reuse and accumulation also carry important messages about production, consumption, excess, and waste that extend beyond these particular communities. For this, I return to Jane Bennett’s political and ecological interest in things. In her examination of vibrant matter and the agency of objects, she emphasizes the need to recognize waste as not simply hidden “away” in landfills. Commodities are produced at a rapid and excessive pace and the impulse to dispose of them in order to make room for new ones attempts

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192 Weld, *Dream Singers, Story Tellers*, 41.

193 Smalls, “Food for Thought,” 80-81

194 Smalls, “Food for Thought,” 80.
to conceal the “vitality of matter.” After being discarded into landfills as unwanted junk, however, things often live the remainder of their lives accumulating in trash heaps and generating harmful chemicals and gases that affect our planet and its inhabitants in a multitude of ways. It is neither controversial nor surprising, then, to assert that things—in this case, trash—are political. They form the settings of human action, and their agency within and beyond human intention provokes questions concerning who or what should be considered the focus of political, ethical, and legal action.

The Philadelphia Wireman sculptures, composed of objects and materials likely destined for a landfill before the maker interceded, therefore represent a kind of personal, political, and ecological intervention. The artist, of whatever identity or background, saw these objects and materials, likely in mass quantities, and was prompted to transform them into something creative, communicative, and intentional. Whether or not these sculptures were ever meant to be seen, they disrupt an ordinary ease of looking at everyday objects and force viewers to confront rather than ignore the reality and vitality of our waste. The artist’s effort to reuse found materials

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195 Most obviously, trash in landfills releases methane gas, a greenhouse gas contributing to climate change. In 2015, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimated that landfills are the third-leading cause of methane emissions in the United States. Many EPA efforts have targeted organizations and industries for the reducing emissions, but have placed less emphasis on individual actions. Increasing attention to the ways in which seemingly insignificant and mundane activities and decisions have also proven to hasten climate change and its effects. Bennett, Vibrant Matter, vii-viii, 5-6; Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 16.

196 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 39; and Coole and Frost, New Materialisms, 16.

197 Scholars of phenomenology have illuminated the politics of everyday life and how quotidian landscapes are for exercising, maintaining, and resisting social control. Art has a long history of political intervention related to places and the ways we inhabit and transform them, and more recent scholarship has explored the particularities of humans’ relationships with urban spaces and how art mediates the need for greater political responsibility, denoting current ways of occupying space and promoting new ways. Harriet Hawkins, “Turn your trash into… Rubbish, art and politics. Richard Wentworth’s geographical imagination,” Social & Cultural Geography 11, no. 8 (December 2010): 806-7. David Doris discusses the transformation of everyday things in Yoruba culture and the power they have to disrupt an ordinary easy
demonstrates resiliency and resourcefulness on the one hand, and aligns with environmentally conscious practices on the other. In this way, the works fall under the parameters of “environmental art,” a broad term comprising a number of other artistic practices and movements, including land, earth, sustainable, and conceptual art. This movement emerged in the 1960s but continues to grow today as artists consider humans’ relationships with nature as well as the damaging impact we have had on the earth.198

In the assemblage of agents operating on and around the Philadelphia Wireman, *Dream Singers, Story Tellers* responded to previous translations of the works, presented new possible contexts, but placed even greater emphasis on the works themselves and their power to communicate important ideas for a contemporary audience. This shifting dynamic between the objects and their multiple translations and translators are similarly evident in the creative responses to the Philadelphia Wireman. While each demonstrates an increasing interest in the objects themselves, the specters of the Wireman’s discovery narrative and projected biography continue to hover above the objects’ reception.199

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199 Creative responses such as this are not isolated, instead representing an established practice in the interpretation and reinterpretation of self-taught and outsider art—Henry Darger being one of the most familiar examples of this.
Creative Contributions

One example of creative responses to the Philadelphia Wireman comes from poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis, who devoted one piece of her 26-year poem, *Drafts*, to the mysterious identity of the Philadelphia Wireman and the artist’s work, bound in electric systems, surges, and spiritual power. The visual and literary qualities of the poem more immediately respond to the works themselves, but elsewhere, they respond to the ideologies of fetishism and primitivism embedded in the reception of the works. Throughout “Draft 22: Philadelphia Wireman,” DuPlessis references materials, patterns, and repetitions of the Wireman works and individual fragments, all twisted together:

*scratch, gum, mite, dust: traveling* the range of signs.
Grunge things junk things, things singed by light.
HOW hung the hinge from void to word
from word to work the rage of signs
from work to bode asymmetrically
wherever agendas TRAVELLED.

The detritus
luck the traumscrapt: lucking
transcript, trauma, script, and scrap. How scraped down to
radiobones—*spurts and flecks* of awe, and joy-
rigged jerrybuilt trash dense ovoids zig-filled zeros
*forsaken bridges*:
So much for structure, triple,
odelike, but twisted together, fused
the same, the same, the same again.

Had wound already *radio-text*—hinging welds
for reels and rolls of silver. Ratiocinated lap joint. Lapis.
Foldit the wire. Foaled OF.
Did OF again.

Heard the mixing of the tracks *red “8” inside the train*
did mop microchip matting more and more
*from woof to bode.* Did lapsed card, bent
pin, phillips screw, pop top, junk spot, knurled nut,
and plastic stirrer down by the loading dock.200

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Elsewhere DuPlessis considers the unknown nature of the artist, and the time, place, and overall atmosphere of their making and discovery:

the moon. HOW, what is this HOW
by silver leaden street lamps, ordinary site,
that debris insomnia topographic extreme, cool lit MADE.
Spurts and flecks of dirt along the baseboard. Red number shadow registers neon fizz.

Twisted together
scratch, gum, mite, dust, web
agendas; the overspill exilic.
Possessed forsaken bridges
asymmetrically, wherever debris insomnia trebled

extreme, cool lit
Juncted agendas that twine their hinge

Throughout, DuPlessis alludes to the spiritual, “talisman”-like qualities of the works in phrases such as “Spirit Writing” and amalgamated words and expressions like “talismum circulations of wrapping” and “DO bottle-cap talism-um.”

DuPlessis describes Ollman and Thompson’s account of the Philadelphia Wireman in the endnotes of the collection, and discusses the origins for some of the other ideas and phrases used throughout. For example, she ends the poem by referencing a quote by Thompson in his explanation of the Kongo tradition: “can you tie up the anger of the dead?” Some of the descriptors in her poem also come from lists of the materials from the Fleisher/Ollman Gallery website or from reviews and stories of the Wireman from Art News and The Philadelphia

201 DuPlessis, Drafts 1-38, 141.

202 DuPlessis, Drafts 1-38, 143.
Inquirer. She draws from Ollman and Thompson’s accounts, and in this way, is linked to their fetishizing process. However, DuPlessis is both transparent about her sources and reflexive about her interest in the works and artist, including the narratives that accompany them, and how she translates them through her own creative voice. She is aware of her position within the assemblage and her power to communicate something about the artist in ways that previous scholars, critics, and dealers have lacked. In all her Drafts, for example, she discusses the relationship between multiple subjectivities—of gender, Jewishness, Unitedstateness, homelessness, and more—which each carry their own brand of haunting:

As in Unitedstateness, given the compromises and strange estrangements of that global privilege. Thus I am being haunted, by homelessness… and the sense of moral and ethical losses of community. I am haunted by the “outsider” artist (“Draft 22: Philadelphia Wireman”), whose powerful wire sculptures came close to being lost, thrown out with the trash.

DuPlessis alludes to the idea of multiple subjectivities in her repeated mention of agendas in “Draft 22,” and how the Wireman works unite them. Whether she is referencing the multiple “creators” of the Wireman—Ollman, Thompson, and others who have viewed and interpreted the works—or the multitude of references and subjectivities at play on any artist’s identity, it is a powerful notion for understanding the reception of the Philadelphia Wireman, the web of

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203 DuPlessis’s interests in the creative process of artists such as the Philadelphia Wireman extend into her literary and visual art-making practice as well. Beyond her thematic capturing of the Wireman sculptures in “Draft 22,” she is inspired by the drive to be making that is manifested in artists who tend to be less privileged than many “fine” artists: “This is a great example of human potential. As well, the art can be witty, serious, and show an extraordinary imagination for materials.” DuPlessis also finds the transformation of debris into meaning and “transcendent experiences” compelling, recognizing this “recuperation of traces” in the ethos of Walter Benjamin, from whom she often draws ideas and inspiration. Relatedly, collage represents a central element of her work as a poet and visual artist. Her Drafts, for example, are often based on collage themes, including non-narrative and anti-teleological juxtapositions and the creating of an experience from debris. DuPlessis, Drafts 1-38, 273; Rachel Blau DuPlessis, e-mail message to author, March 8, 2017.

identities that artists bring to the making of their work, and those of the people that view, interpret, and respond to them. Furthermore, by calling her poems “drafts,” DuPlessis is also making a statement about praxis and the generative possibilities of labeling something as unfinished. Reminding her readers that there is nothing perfect, iconic, static, or memorializing about her poems, she also communicates an important lesson for the analysis of objects and their makers. Her desire to reach deeply into poetic traditions while resisting “poetry,” and to reconfigure its scope and potential for meaning parallels the practices of visual artists.205

Like DuPlessis, Sue Stauffacher is also transparent about her borrowing of details from previous translations of the Philadelphia Wireman in her comic book series, Wireman (Figure 4.4). Stauffacher started Wireman after she first saw a Philadelphia Wireman sculpture in the Akron Art Museum. Created with middle school students in mind, the series follows the story of Andre and his friend Maya, both young people of color, and their relationship with the mysterious Wireman, whose sculptures Andre discovered in an abandoned warehouse after being chased by school bullies.206 The rest of the two and a half volumes of this comic book series follows Andre and his classmates as they get into and out of troublesome situations not unlike those that readers of Wireman might be personally experiencing. While the story began with a quest to know who the Wireman is, it has become a story about a variety of urban experiences for people of all backgrounds.207

205 DuPlessis, “Blue Studios: Gender Arcades.”
Figure 4.4 – Comfort Love, Adam Withers, and Sue Stauffacher, *Wireman* Volume 1, 2007
Stauffacher relies heavily on the narrative of the Wireman and the potential African American identity of the artist.\(^{208}\) In this case, however, the Philadelphia Wireman’s asserted African American identity represents a powerful tool for connecting to children of color who are not used to seeing people who look like them in the media, least of all their books or comics. Stauffacher hoped that by offering young readers of color a chance to see themselves and their world reflected in literature, this alternative visual and literary format would interest students and build literacy and vocabulary skills without stigmatizing reading difficulties. By connecting with hard-to-reach readers through culturally relevant topics, familiar characters and settings, and plots rich in everyday experiences, including friendships, bullies, adolescent angst, family difficulties, and death, she anticipated that most students could find characters in the stories to whom they could personally relate. Furthermore, while Wireman remains a foundational character and plot point throughout each of the issues, the kids are the main characters, and their everyday experiences carry the stories and remove the barrier between the superhero world of Wireman and their own lived experience.\(^{209}\)

Stauffacher is transparent about her sources, motives, goals, and where her creative voice responds to the ideas of the artworks and their history. Moreover, she considers Wireman to be a crowd-sourced and collaborative project, and has spent several years travelling to different schools and talking with students to ensure her ideas are relevant to readers or to discover if they have ideas of their own.\(^{210}\) Her willingness to engage critiques of her work and hear new ideas


\(^{210}\) Stauffacher also pulls aesthetic ideas and themes from the real Philadelphia Wireman, and even the magic power attributed to the Wireman works is transformed into something less otherworldly or
signifies the prominence of collaboration within her creative and educational translation of the Philadelphia Wireman, and it offers another important lesson related to transparency and reflexivity for people working with and writing about art and artists. Collaborating with the artist isn’t possible in this case, but by partnering with students and others in the making of Wireman, she extends the possible networks and relationships within the Philadelphia Wireman assemblage.

Drawing from Stauffacher’s crowd-sourcing methods combined with Bennett’s theory of assemblages, I propose an approach to art that is similarly crowd-sourced and reflexive of the multitude of human and nonhuman agents within its reception. While DuPlessis and Stauffacher rely on the mediating historical context of the Philadelphia Wireman, they each represent a different set of relationships with the works, discovery narrative, and speculative biography within the assemblage of the Wireman’s reception. Ollman and others’ voices echo through each later translation, but with each new added voice, there is greater potential for unflattening and centering the story of the Philadelphia Wireman. As tangible things, the Wireman sculptures remain static, but the processes of interpreting them are, or should be open to revision and disassembling. There may be other contexts, communities, and traditions for the Philadelphia inaccessible within the Wireman series. She draws upon the plot tools of mystery and magic without fetishizing the maker or the objects. Throughout the series, Stauffacher and various graphic artists rely on certain aesthetic themes; in particular, wire sculptures and jewelry, and even ropes and knots play important roles in many of the storylines. The anklet that Andre and other Wireman followers wear is one example of this, but also knots of rope throughout the series represent certain plot points. One character named Captain Phil is skilled in making knots, some characters find knots of cord signaling grief or thievery, and a stolen quipu knot from the Metropolitan Museum ends up in Andre’s possession. Sue Stauffacher, Wireman 1 & 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Sue Stauffacher, 2007); Sue Stauffacher, Wireman 3 (StreeTread, 2015).

See discussion of Nick Sousanis and “unflattening” in the introductory chapter, which also relates to what Judy Attfield describes as “wildness” and the ways in which it calls for an object-centered analysis that considers things anew and outside of their original designed intention. In this way, wildness is both a state of detachment and state of possibility, and it works on multiple levels for the Philadelphia Wireman—an artist who saw the potential in found objects for the construction of art, and whose art
Wireman far beyond the reductive biography constructed by Ollman and Thompson and reified by others. For an artist whose origins are uncertain, future translations require greater reflexivity, transparency, and fluidity, and a more nuanced understanding of tradition and community and how artists respond to them.

**Conclusion: Object Agency and (Non)Identity**

While it may seem that the uncertain identity for the works attributed to the Philadelphia Wireman would have left interpretive possibilities open and fluid, the few scholars who initially set out to find the artist have instead concretized a more narrow and limited narrative surrounding the works, which are embedded in ideologies of both primitivism and fetishism. Ultimately, the impulse to locate a categorical home for the Philadelphia Wireman, along with other artists categorized as self-taught, outsider, African American, or otherwise, especially by emphasizing the most exotic or bizarre aspects of their identity or background, has resulted in a flattening of artists and their art.

An important lesson from all of the Philadelphia Wireman translations is the greater need for reflexivity and transparency of voice. My own reflexive process, for example, has involved continually asking myself if it is possible to look at the Wireman works and find meaning in them based on new proposed contexts, without subscribing to the same process of narrative making I confront. I’m not convinced that it is, and for this reason, this chapter remains open-ended. Rather than attempt to identify the maker or even to consider new contexts for the art, this chapter pieced together the shortcomings of previous translations as well as potential lessons for future scholarly undertakings of the Wireman and other artists.

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One important part of Jane Bennett’s work for material culture scholars moving forward involves decentering the human, and re-centering the world of objects as we draw meaning from the world around us, and especially as we strive to be more culturally, environmentally, and politically responsible humans. As she explains:

How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies? By “vitality” I mean the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own. My aspiration is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analysis of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due.²¹²

Bennett’s refocusing on the agency of things seems a natural direction for a body of artworks that lack an identified maker, but it also opens up possibilities for engagement with other forms of art, in which scholars shift their focus away from their own human-centeredness, that of the artist, and aspects of their identity or biography, to consider the impact and importance of the work that artists produce and put into the world—their expression of voice. Since assemblages that include nonhuman agents are, according to Bennett, more “loose” and “slippery,” the Philadelphia Wireman objects also have the capacity to reshape art historical discourse overly concerned with an artist’s identity with any one category, community, or tradition, especially through methods that constantly reconsider artworks, what they communicate in a variety of contexts, and what it might mean to continually look at and interpret art as if you were viewing it for the first time. While it was the objects that initially inspired the problematic speculative biography for the Philadelphia Wireman, the danger of centering on vibrant matter is not in the objects themselves, but rather, previously human-centered interpretations of objects and their power.

²¹² Bennett, Vibrant Matter, viii.
I propose, as an extension of Bennett’s *assemblage* theory and in an effort to re-center objects within the reception of art, a crowd-sourced approach to the Wireman’s reception. Importantly, this approach would apply to other artists and objects as well by openly inviting new voices to join and respond to any given artist’s reception history and future. It would also emphasize reflexivity and transparency as new voices acknowledge their relationships to previous translations, the impact of their additions or correctives, and their role within art’s reception. As a potentially powerful tool for destabilizing the positions of cultural authority that many curators, connoisseurs, and scholars of art have long occupied, crowd-sourced reception would ultimately contribute to the decentering, unflattening, and resisting of canon formation and artistic hierarchies.
CONCLUSION. 
ON CANONICAL ABSENCE(S) AND RECESSION

This project began with the problem of canon formation, its relationship to alterity, and the processes of flattening, centering, and haunting that consign artists to the margins of the art historical canon. I aimed to resist canonicity and reshape the ways in which scholars, curators, and others in the professional art world tend to orient artists within or outside strictly defined categories. This ultimately brought me to what I describe as the “unexpected object”—the thing that defies categories and transgresses boundaries. Importantly, perceptions of “expected” or “unexpected” are subjective and personal, and an object that appears “unexpected” to me—such as the Bridge Bowl—may not be unexpected to Chris Luther or others in the Seagrove community, where there exists a previous tradition of creating unexpected works, such as monkey, ring, or puzzle jugs. Nevertheless, through my perspective of the singular object of Chris Luther’s Bridge Bowl, Dominie Nash’s Stills From a Life series, and the large body of works attributed to the Philadelphia Wireman, I explored ideas about tradition, community, and voice and their potential as tools for destabilizing canonical taxonomies and dominant discourse and illuminating the fluidities and circulations at play in and around any artist.

I have examined how artists Chris Luther and Dominie Nash simultaneously resist, sustain, and alter the creative traditions and communities in which they work. Even without a clear or decipherable voice, the Philadelphia Wireman similarly resists and reifies flattened and haunted ideas and expectations of both community and tradition. Each of these terms required a more expansive update, which in the case of Chris Luther and Dominie Nash, was supplemented
by their voices directly. In lieu of a clear artistic voice for the Philadelphia Wireman, I refined ideas of voice and its relationship to agency, uncovering the multitude of agents at work within the objects’ reception before, during, and after they were situated as art.

Chris Luther’s choice of Seagrove, North Carolina as home for his pottery practice plants him firmly in a perceived pottery tradition. While Luther is proud of his heritage as a fourth-generation potter here—an identity that elicits particular expectations, ideas, and imaginaries of Seagrove pottery tradition and history—he produces sculptural work that visually resists the tradition in which he was trained. His idea of “how one idea leads to the next,” however, reveals the vibrancy of Seagrove pottery in its contemporary and global context; in the process, it redefines tradition as dynamic and innovative, rather than stagnant or old-fashioned. I looked at Chris Luther’ Bridge Bowl as an anomaly within his pottery practice as well as that of others in Seagrove, North Carolina. While it contains practices, materials, and memories expected of a fourth-generation Seagrove potter, it bridges Luther’s practice to a multitude of other unexpected aesthetic and ideological origins.

Where previous scholars have emphasized the local, I detailed Seagrove’s global history. This includes the seventeenth-century settling of German and English immigrants in the region as well as the influx of various global, especially Asian aesthetics with industrialization in the early twentieth century. Today, Seagrove potters can access an even wider variety of ceramics and other creative practices through workshops, conferences, museums, and the Internet. Over one hundred potters from across the country and around the world decided to call Seagrove home. Rather than simply adopt traditional North Carolina wares and leave their own backgrounds behind, each potter has inherently changed the landscape of what North Carolina pottery is by bringing their aesthetic and ideological principles with them. These global
influences expand previous understandings of tradition in Seagrove and beyond as something that is fluid and dynamic rather than immobile or confined to any particular place. Chris Luther’s notion of “how one idea leads to the next”—illustrated through the serendipitous evolution of his creative ideas between the Bridge Bowl and other works—more accurately accounts for the ebbs and flows of tradition and how it shifts over time and space.

Building on ideas of tradition in Luther’s practice, I complicated and refined ideas of community through the framework of Dominie Nash’s textile art, especially her *Stills From a Life* series. Nash’s career parallels broader histories of art quilt production and reception within the contemporary art world. Enduring assumptions about textile art, including its ties to uncritical binaries—private and domestic versus public and professional spaces, women’s versus men’s work, technical perfection versus creative exploration, and especially, communal production versus individual innovation—respond to Nash’s discussion of the quilt paradox, and the difficulties textile artists face trying to move beyond stereotypes leftover from quilting history. In response to this, I illustrate the multifaceted role of community in contemporary textile artists’ practices through the idea of a textile sensibility, and how Nash’s work expands previous ideas of community through her capturing of aesthetic relationships and positioning between multiple creative and professional circles. Importantly, a textile sensibility both connects her to other contemporary textile artists through the universal qualities of working with fabric or quilting techniques, but it is also individual to Nash’s practice. This includes her spontaneous use and reuse of fabric, her collage-like process, and her unexpected blending of artistic genres more traditionally tied to painting or drawing—as evidenced by her *Stills From a Life* series.
Where Luther and Nash’s unexpected objects served as visual metaphors for understanding and challenging the paradoxical expectations of art historical canons, the hundreds of wire sculptures attributed to the Philadelphia Wireman illustrate another dimension in the canonical paradox. Unlike the Bridge Bowl and Stills From a Life, these wire sculptures defy easy explanation. Their lack of a biographical creative context had the initial potential to resist canon formation according to an artist’s background and training. However, their early categorization under the umbrellas of outsider, self-taught, and/or African American art by alleged experts in the field solidified an identity for the artist that continues to be accepted without mediation.

As an artist of unknown origin, the Philadelphia Wireman requires a framework that illuminates the unarticulated powers of “artistic authority” and multiple agents at work within and outside contemporary art canons, and situates their discourses within larger social, cultural, and political contexts. Jane Bennett’s theory of assemblages provided one means of understanding the multitude of voices translating the Wireman works in one way or another. Viewing the Philadelphia Wireman works as part of a larger assemblage reveals the variety of agents and voices—among them, the discoverer, collectors, scholars, gallery spaces, outsider art market, and art historical taxonomies that have physically and ideologically both shaped the environment in which these objects were received and created the discourse and narratives around these works and their alleged maker. In this way, the Philadelphia Wireman objects provided a gateway to my focus on the question of voice, especially how other voices of perceived artistic authority confined rather than liberated the artist in the absence of a knowable maker.

These newly expanded definitions of tradition, community, and voice ultimately provide
useful frameworks for viewing, understanding, thinking, and writing about contemporary artists in ways more representative of how they view themselves and how their work connects to other artists, traditions, and practices, without merely relegating them to new categories built on assertions and perceptions of difference. In an effort to frame the contemporary reception of these artists in more concrete terms, the following sections describe contemporary examples of the physical spaces and exhibitions in which the work of Luther, Nash, and the Wireman have previously appeared, though never together. Each receptive space includes a range of challenges and boundaries for the artists who have shown or attempted to show there. Furthermore, the lack of overlap or even potential for overlap between Luther, Nash, and the Wireman within these exhibition spaces speaks deeply to the frailties of canon formation and the processes of flattening, centering, and haunting that continue to limit and reduce the reception of each artist to particular kinds of spaces, markets, and audiences. To focus on only one of any of these receptive spaces would leave out the generative potential correlations between the artists, which I have illuminated throughout this project. Each example speaks to the continued presence of reductive ideas of tradition and community and the troubling absence or awareness of voice.

Celebration of Seagrove Potters

Every third weekend in November, Seagrove, North Carolina, welcomes thousands of visitors to the two largest local pottery events of the season: the Seagrove Pottery Festival and the Celebration of Seagrove Potters. The former has been running for over thirty years. The latter, however, was more recently established as a response to local conflicts surrounding the public face of Seagrove pottery. In 2014, News and Observer arts and culture writer Andrea Weigl described the local North Carolina pottery community of 2008 as one “at war.”
Referencing the break from the *Seagrove Pottery Festival* and founding of the *Celebration of Seagrove Potters* at the time, she narrates, “Potters known for throwing clay were openly slinging mud at one another. Some broke away to start their own pottery festival to compete against the long established event in Seagrove.”

Chris Luther remembers the founding of the Seagrove Area Potters Association (SAPA) and the *Celebration of Seagrove Potters* as related to the making and distributing of maps in the area at the time for marketing purposes. The correlation between the two suggests that the conflict was one about the public image of Seagrove pottery and whether or not it was fully reflective or inclusive of the interests of all potters in the area:

> There was a map, but they didn’t like that, so a group of potters went in and did their own, and then that kind of grew and turned into SAPA… But when we had the map rolling, Phil Morgan was on board with that at the time and when the split with the festival happened, he kind of went with the festival and museum group and other potters started SAPA. So we wanted to do a festival and I don’t know whose idea it was to do it the same weekend as the *Seagrove Pottery Festival*, but anyway, that was dirty laundry that should have stayed in the house instead of in front of the customers.

The feud has since largely dissolved, according to Weigl, who writes, “The two pottery festivals co-exist peacefully on the same weekend before Thanksgiving… and bring thousands of people to Seagrove every year.” She quotes potters Mark Hewitt and Chad Brown who agreed that tensions have since subsided. In the end, Brown suggests, the public disagreements actually benefited both events and “brought in a lot of people to Seagrove.”

Despite the controversial beginnings of the *Celebration of Seagrove Potters*, which

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214 Unless stated otherwise, all ideas and quotes from Chris Luther in this chapter come from an in-person interview with myself on February 17, 2018.

215 Weigl, “NC Pottery Center rebounds.”
celebrated its tenth anniversary in November 2017, the event is enormously successful each year and is a strong representation of the diversity of potters in Seagrove today. As Luther describes:

> It really turned out nice because they transformed this big warehouse [Luck’s Cannery] with the curtains and drapes they set up for all these festivals. They come in and do that and everybody sets up their own booth and has their own lighting, and it’s just a nice open space. Plenty of room for everybody to move around.

While a handful of potters present works at both the *Seagrove Pottery Festival* and *Celebration of Seagrove Potters*, most are represented at the latter—a fact which has often led to greater success, according to Luther: “I think the big draw to the *Celebration* is the fact that we have all the Seagrove potters and you can see everybody under one roof, or the majority of people under one roof, and not have to ride around the countryside if you’re limited on time or travel from a farther distance.” Luther also describes differences in the feel between the two events: “Just having the drapes and curtains kind of elevates the feel of the space. It really transforms it and makes it nicer.” While the *Celebration* brings all the potters together in one distinct space, the *Festival* is split between the elementary school gymnasium and tents set up on the ball field. As Luther explains, “You have to walk around outside, and it’s dusty… Not saying that it’s worse, but it’s a little different.” The *Celebration of Seagrove Potters* also holds a ticketed gala event on Friday night, with dinner, drinks, live entertainment, and most importantly, first dibs on potters’ work: “Everybody dresses up… it’s a lot more conversation than just selling pots. The gala is nice and I don’t know why, but I usually do better on Friday night than I do the rest of the weekend.”

The setting of the *Celebration of Seagrove Potters* presents a rare formal opportunity to see Seagrove potters’ works out of the context of their workshops and homes. While its history speaks to internal conflicts in the community and attempts to harmonize the broad diversity of potters’ interests and output, it also represents a temporary location for the resolution of ideas of
tradition and community that are less visible within the receptive spaces of Dominie Nash and the Philadelphia Wireman. In many ways, the *Celebration of Seagrove Potters* puts potters on a level playing field and works more to some potters’ advantages than others, such as Jugtown Pottery, whose marketing relies heavily on the atmosphere they create for visitors to their site. As Luther explains, “It probably works better for a lot of potters over Jugtown.” Referencing the feeling of stepping back in time that many visitors experience when they visit Jugtown Pottery, Luther continues, “I think that is kind of their niche space… so I don’t know that they’ve really presented pots at the *Celebration* in years.”

While the *Celebration of Seagrove Potters* brings together the wide variety of Seagrove potters under one roof, the disjunction between the anomalous formal nature of the event and the day-to-day on-site character of many Seagrove potters’ work and environment speaks to the larger polarization that continues to persist in Seagrove between ideas of tradition and the range of people working in the area today. As Luther suggests:

> I think the people moving in now just want to capitalize on the tourism we already have and just take advantage of the business aspect rather than try to learn anything about the tradition. And I think the people that have been here for a while are going one of two directions: they’re either trying to entrench themselves in tradition or what they want to put out there is traditional, or they’re trying to branch out and do new things… There’s not a lot of middle ground.

Luther believes that Seagrove as a whole, however, is “kind of steering in the broader idea of local and tradition and trying to keep it as a small, happy family down here… I think in recent years [the push toward the *local* tradition] is more.” This is less about trying to create a homogenous idea of what Seagrove represents than it is “just a marketing ploy,” according to Luther, but the results are often the same.

The controversy surrounding the early beginnings of the *Celebration of Seagrove Potters* along with its eventual resolution speaks to the critical role of conflict in destabilizing and
challenging the powers and influences of cultural authority, especially those representing a wide variety of people and their creative practices. Even though tensions still exist around definitions of tradition in Seagrove, and the historical canon of local pottery continues to occupy the everyday public face of the community, there exists a space in which all Seagrove potters can show their diverse work together in relative harmony. Within the textile and other contemporary art worlds in which Dominie Nash exhibits, however, conflict still exists between those wishing to broaden the parameters of what defines an art quilt and those who continue to restrain it.

Quilt National

The inaugural Quilt National show in 1979 was an important moment for the reception of art quilts. Nearly two hundred artists entered works, from which forty-four were chosen for the first show. In almost forty years, those numbers have doubled, with close to four hundred artists submitting work for the 2017 show, from which eighty-five were selected. The 1979 Quilt National was also the first major exhibition held at the Dairy Barn Cultural Arts Center in Athens, Ohio, which at the time was “still very much a barn” rather than the fully renovated space it is today: “The trenches were still in the concrete floors; the stanchions were still in place; there was nothing covering the windows; and even though the cows had been gone for a decade, there were flies everywhere.” Dominie Nash first exhibited at Quilt National in 1993 and has shown at least four times between then and 2011—the last time her work was accepted. She describes it a weekend-long celebration that includes a variety of awards for select artists and several social events, dinners, and other opportunities for the accepted artists to meet and

discuss their work.\textsuperscript{217}

From the beginning, \textit{Quilt National}'s co-founders, Nancy Crow and Françoise Barnes made a clear distinction between their exhibiting artists—those “whose works were deemed ‘not a quilt’ (and therefore quite unacceptable to the organizers of the other quilt shows of the day)”—from their traditional quilt roots. Their mission was deceptively simple: to provide an “opportunity and a venue where this newly developing cousin of the classic quilt—the art quilt—could finally be seen” and to “carry the definition of quilting far beyond its traditional parameters and to promote quiltmaking as what it always has been—an art form.”\textsuperscript{218} Importantly, \textit{Quilt National} participants have always been identified as “artists using fabric” rather than “quilters,” and while their works were “‘quilts’ by virtue of their structure,” they were intended to be viewed on a vertical rather than horizontal plane.\textsuperscript{219}

In its response to exhibitions exclusively showing traditional rather than art quilts at the time, Barnes and Crow’s mission resonates with critiques of the 1971 exhibition, \textit{Abstract Design in American Quilts}. Many reviewers of Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof’s show argued that their celebration of modern aesthetics and distance from quilt culture and communities failed to account for the ways in which quilts were already recognized as important art forms within the communities in which they were produced.\textsuperscript{220} In this way, the 1971 exhibition likely represented and set a precedent for the “other quilt shows of the day” referenced in \textit{Quilt National}'s mission, which were uninviting of contemporary art quilters. However, the

\textsuperscript{217} Unless otherwise stated, all of the following quotations and information about \textit{Quilt National} from Dominie Nash come from a phone interview between Nash and myself on February 13, 2018.


\textsuperscript{219} “Background & Purpose.”

\textsuperscript{220} Bernick, “A Quilt Is an Art Object,” 134.
only other exhibiting opportunities for these artists at the time, according to Quilt National’s website, were in mixed media fiber shows alongside baskets and weavings.\footnote{221 “Background & Purpose.”}

In recognizing the need for an alternative showcase for art quilts, then, the organizers also separated Quilt National’s scope from mixed media art, and in the process established the privileged, yet marginalized position in which art quilts continue to exist today—as elaborated through Dominie Nash’s experiences with the quilt paradox. Nash describes it as place where she and other textile artists are “stuck in this little category that doesn’t fit except among ourselves,” as well as “special category,” where viewers focus more on their process rather than composition and jurors might not always select her work because it was viewed as “this odd thing,” which doesn’t quite fit in with quilts or paintings.\footnote{222 Dominie Nash, interview with author, April 17, 2016.}

Innovation has always been at the center of Quilt National’s focus, and for most of its life, the range of quilts accepted for the show continually grew each year, demonstrating their growing inclusivity of more creative art quilt interpretations. In Nash and others’ opinions, however, recent focus on more traditional quilts or art quilts that in some way reference quilt tradition and history has stunted this expansiveness:

\textit{Quilt National}, at least when it started, was supposed to be about innovative quilts. And when you look at their catalogues, obviously not everything is innovative, but there’s much more of that than there would be in the big [International] Quilt Festival shows… In recent years, it’s been a little more towards the traditional, and I think it’s partly because they have a new director at the Dairy Barn where the show is held.

Jane Forrest Redfern took over as Executive Director of the Dairy Barn Arts Center in 2012 after
Andrea Lewis resigned. From Nash’s perspective, Redfern has “sort of latched onto Nancy Crow,” one of Quilt National’s original organizers, and in this way focused more on Quilt National’s past than its future:

[Nancy Crow] is probably one of the most well known of art quilters in that community. She basically started the Quilt National, and she does a lot of teaching and has for a very long time… And so she has the reputation of being the one. And because she has this early connection with the Dairy Barn and Quilt National, they just go back to her a lot. So that’s been kind of disappointing. I mean I haven’t been in it for the last few times, so maybe it’s just sour grapes, but I can tell that other people, who maybe even are in it, feel that the shows are not as strong as they used to be.

As Nash acknowledges, her opinion is not unaffected by her recent rejections from Quilt National shows, but according to her, Redfern’s choice in appointing Nancy Crow as one of the jurors for the 2017 show resulted in “one of the more traditional looking shows that they’ve had in a long time.” She continues, “So I hope that’s not the direction that they’re going to keep going, but I just don’t know. I looked at the upcoming shows and it’s sort of more of the same.” Nash is likely referencing the inclusion of Quilt National’s other co-founder, François Barnes as one of the jurors for the upcoming 2019 Quilt National. While previous Quilt National jurors always seemed to distance the show from traditional quilts, Nash describes much of what they choose to exhibit as bordering traditional and art quilts, with more emphasis on the former as of recent.

Quilt National’s history and contemporary presence represent both the inclusive and exclusive characteristics of community that endure in the reception of textile art today. On the one hand, Quilt National created a physical space in which art quilters—who felt both excluded from exhibitions solely showing traditional quilts and overlooked or reduced by exhibitions

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grouping quilts in with other fiber arts—could come together as a community and celebrate their innovative approach to quilts. It also supported the established community of art quilters in Ohio at the time and helped grow the artistic and economic community in and around Athens.

As this community has grown with more and more quilters submitting their work every other year, however, jurors have become more selective in the types of artists they choose to represent competing visions of the contemporary art quilt community. As Nash suggests, recent leadership has chosen a direction that seems to look more toward art quilting’s past rather than its potential future, thereby restricting the boundaries of art quilts to those that, in style and technique, reference historically traditional quilts rather than aesthetic ideas from other communities within and outside the world of textiles. In categorizing gestures such as this, important figures in the art quilt community continue to embrace congruity rather than expansiveness or experimentation. In this way, the history and contemporary presence of the Quilt National has many similarities to that of the Outsider Art Fair, where the Philadelphia Wireman works have been shown on more than one occasion. While the fair created a space for exhibiting the work of artists who tend to be excluded from more “mainstream” contemporary art exhibitions and galleries, rigidities between defining who is in and who is out in the outsider art canon are as rampant as ever.

**Outsider Art Fair**

The New York Outsider Art Fair celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary at the Chelsea Metropolitan Pavilion in January of 2017. The fair has grown in terms of the number of exhibitors and attendees since the first show in 1993; while the earliest fair featured artists from roughly twenty-five galleries and welcomed around three thousand guests, attendance has tripled
in recent years and the number of exhibitors more than doubled, with over sixty national and international galleries exhibiting works in 2017. Art critic and regular attendee James Kalm documented his experiences visiting the 2017 show in a video tour posted online. Throughout the video, he moves through the exhibition spaces, looks closely at a variety of artists’ work, talks with gallery owners and artists, fills in with bits of information about artists whose work he recognizes, and generally speculates about art, fine art, outsider art, and how each is defined.

Kalm first visits the Catinca Tabacaru Gallery, where he sees the art of Greg Haberny, which includes an extensive collection of mixed media collages and sculptures made of objects and materials from everyday life, such as colanders, umbrellas, glass, board, wire, and ashes (Figure 5.1). After meeting the artist—a white man in his thirties or forties wearing glasses and a black hooded sweatshirt—and complimenting his work, Kalm wanders to the next booth, thinking aloud, “Well, I don’t know if Greg would qualify as your standard outsider…” Next, Kalm walks into the booth for Stephen Romano, whose gallery specializes in both outsider and what Kalm calls “esoteric, hermetic, mystical work.” As he comments on paintings by William A. Blayney, Romano informs him that Blayney was a “self-proclaimed Baptist minister” and used to sell his work out of his Winnebago in parking lots.

Elsewhere, Kalm looks at pieces by James Work and Ramon Diaz, and explains, “One of the things I like about a lot of outsider art is the way that they are able to repurpose stuff that most people throw out.” He also learns about the comic art of Frank Johnson, whose body of work was created in secret over a fifty-year period of time, and spends several minutes observing

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heavily detailed large-scale drawings by Courttnay Cooper and contemplating distinctions between Cooper’s positioning as an “outsider” rather than a “fine” artist. Moving toward the Ricco/Moresco Gallery booth, which Kalm describes as one of the most important galleries for outsider art in New York, he talks about the work of George Widener, “a big discovery of the outsider art world.” Kalm views works by Carlo Zinelli, remembering that they were produced “feverishly” in a psychiatric hospital within a five- to seven-year period before he stopped making art completely. He also discusses art by Susan Te Kahurangi King, who he explains is autistic and unable to speak, as well as Judith Scott, who he says was “challenged.” Kalm spends a few moments looking at the work of one of his favorite artists, Paul Laffolay, a “unique individual,” for whom Kalm again questions the label “outsider.” Laffolay was trained in

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architectural drawing and was very well read, according to Kalm, but preferred to make works alone in his basement studio rather than interact with the “academic, avant-garde.”

Kalm’s review of the Outsider Art Fair illustrates the persistent narrating of tropes which simultaneously delineate who is in and who is out, even within the outsider art canon. From the start, Kalm questions the inclusion of artists whose work he perceives as “not standard” for outsider art, despite the works’ aesthetic similarities to other artists using found media, as well as his own statement that one of the things he likes about outsider art is the repurposing of found objects. Whether it was meeting the artist, Greg Haberny, or Kalm’s own perception of his work, something about Haberny didn’t resonate as “outsider” to him. Based on Kalm’s running commentary throughout, qualities that characterize outsider artists might include working from a spiritual vision, having physical or mental disabilities, or creating in isolation—all of which stem from information about the artist themselves rather than the works they create.

Kalm’s video documented a specific kind of contemporary art market to which the Philadelphia Wireman belongs and whose works were also on display at the Outsider Art Fair that year, though Kalm didn’t address them in his video review. This market is less directly applicable to the work of Chris Luther and Dominie Nash, but they have each similarly experienced a perpetuation of certain ideas of identity, community, and tradition based on their background, training, and medium.

**Outsider Futures and Transcending/ Transforming Institutional Limitations**

No single canonical context or receptive space exists for bringing together the work of Chris Luther, Dominie Nash, and the Philadelphia Wireman. In this way, the Celebration of Seagrove Potters, Quilt National, and Outsider Art Fair each speaks to a kind of absence that my
project attempts to fill. If this attempt at resolving some of those absences and spaces of conflict was an exhibition, rather than a dissertation, the opening wall text might read as follows:

Perception and creation are dynamic activities. Just as viewers draw connections to what they have previously seen when viewing a work of art, artists are always finding inspiration from the multitude of images and objects they see on a day-to-day basis, as well as the varying networks to which they are connected, both inside and outside of their creative mediums and geographic communities. This exhibition explores the fluidities of creative identity and dynamism of artistic practice and perception through the work of three artists, linked not by shared mediums, locations, or backgrounds but through the parallels within their practice and work of defining ideas of tradition and community.

Chris Luther, a fourth generation potter from the Seagrove community of North Carolina, looks primarily to the world of images and ideas outside of his geographic community and its historical tradition. Dominie Nash, a textile artist based in the Washington, D.C. area, similarly finds inspiration outside the traditional quilt community even while she sustains threads to quilt history through her unique textile sensibility. While Luther and Nash speak to ideas of tradition and community directly, these ideas are also illustrated through the work they produce. The Philadelphia Wireman, an unknown artist with a long and fraught reception history, further flips expected notions of tradition and community on their head through a lack of decipherable voice more accessible with Nash and Luther. Hundreds of small wire sculptures by this unidentified maker were allegedly found in a Philadelphia alley in the late 1970s, but the variety of traditions and communities with which this artist may have been connected can only be conjectured by the art they left behind.

Throughout this exhibition—itself an experiment in visual perception and association across artistic mediums and genres—we invite new proposed ideas and connections for the work of these three artists.

As suggested by this introductory text, the scope of this project, as an exploration across media, is in many ways what I offer moving forward. By creating an exploratory location in which the work of these artists could all fit, my dissertation breaks down the barriers that would normally separate them and provides a framework for future explorations of art and artists across medium, background, or training. My project launches these artists more fully and forcefully into broader discourses of creativity and art making, while expanding the possible tools for researching and writing about artists in more accurate, conscientious, and even unexpected ways.

There are numerous parallels between these artists’ work and reception, and throughout
this project, I argue for more fluid understandings of tradition and community in order to
decenter their previous usage and transcend the institutional limitations placed upon artists.
Tradition and community are immediate, personal to each artist, but also far-reaching. The ways
in which they are defined can and should be more encompassing of the variety of networks that
exist between art and artists today. I additionally illuminated the powerful potential of
unflattening, decentering, and crowd sourcing approaches, which emphasize reflexivity,
transparency, collaboration, and an evaluative eye toward previous translations of artists’ work
and what they have left out.

Many of my ideas moving forward build off those that culminated around the
Philadelphia Wireman, but they would not be as fruitful or powerful without the insights of Chris
Luther and Dominie Nash’s experiences, my easy access to their voices, and the reflexive lens
through which I view their work. Each translation within all of their receptive histories contains
important lessons for viewers, scholars, and curators of contemporary art. In the case of the
Philadelphia Wireman, virtually all translations of the art have in some way responded to the
story of its discovery, fascination with the artist’s unknown identity, and the speculative
biography established by the earliest interpreters of the work. Some of these voices, however,
responded more to the objects than others, and I highlighted these object-focused approaches in
order to move beyond the marginalizing biography and discovery narrative that has haunted the
Philadelphia Wireman from the beginning.

Similar to other translations of the Philadelphia Wireman, the artworks’ inclusion in
Dream Singers, Story Tellers: An African-American Presence, an exhibition that traveled from
Japan to New Jersey between 1992 and 1994, had its faults as well as some potential merit for
future responses to the Wireman and other artists. It expanded the ideas of community and
tradition discussed in earlier chapters through its attention to shared visual vocabularies and aesthetic communities embodied in the objects themselves. Curator Alison Weld described the exhibition as one about “the materials of culture”—cultures that are not fixed, but that grow and develop—rather than the “artifacts of race.”227 One prevailing aesthetic and theme of the show was the transformation of discarded and dispossessed things into something of value.228 In particular, the operating idea of reuse is a powerful one for both the Philadelphia Wireman works and those of artists such as Thornton Dial, Sr., Ronald Lockett, and Lonnie Holley, among others from the Birmingham-Bessemer artistic community of Alabama. For many of these artists, reusing found and discarded materials is deeply connected to rural African American life in its reflection of social marginalization and the ingenuity of making do in impossible circumstances.229

Practices of transformation and reuse, however, extend far beyond these communities and connect artists such as the Philadelphia Wireman to multiple traditions and movements that are both personal and communal. Artists such as Tim Noble, Sue Webster, Michelle Reader, and Rodrigo McCoubrey represent a small fraction of the number of contemporary artists who use reclaimed or recycled materials for the construction of their artwork. Other important examples of this work come from non-profit organizations and community centers all around the country, which have established spaces for donating, purchasing, and/or creating artwork from materials

227 Weld, Dream Singers, Story Tellers, 39.
229 In his essay in Souls Grown Deep, volume I, Babatunde Lawal connects these transformative processes to African traditions. He explains that while other formally trained artists will often use discarded materials but rework them entirely, many African American self-taught artists will use castoffs with little modification, creating an effect that corresponds to the “wretchedness associated with poverty, affliction, and trauma.” Babatunde Lawal, “African Roots, American Branches” in Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, eds. Paul Arnett and William Arnett (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2000), 42.
that would otherwise be thrown away. I introduce these transformative practices, traditions, and communities as an aesthetic and ideological position for the Philadelphia Wireman works, upon which I will expand in future endeavors. The ideological ties between reuse, sustainable practices, and ecological consciousness represents one facet of this approach, while the vitality of objects and matter and their power to inspire transformation represents another. Whatever the artist’s intentions when the sculptures were made in the 1970s, to me, the Philadelphia Wireman objects contain a contemporary message about the reality of our stuff and how quickly it accumulates out of our immediate sight.

Broader concepts of reuse, transformation, and their ties to vibrant matter or object agency also resonate within the art practices of Chris Luther and Dominie Nash and present additional areas of expansion for the broader scope of this project. Bridging these ideas with those of tradition, community, and voice, my dissertation anticipates future explorations of reuse as an artistic tradition connecting multiple communities around the world and the ways in which reuse responds to personal and collective memory, invention, and sustainability. For example, Luther’s creative reuse and transformation of local and global aesthetics in his pottery practice and Nash’s spontaneous reuse of old quilts and photos to make new textile pieces both demonstrate a kind of visceral response to the liveliness of tangible things.

Moreover, while creative translations of the Philadelphia Wireman by comic and literary artist Sue Stauffacher and poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis echoed previous translations of the works, they demonstrated more ethical and fluid approaches to interpreting or drawing meaning from art.

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overall. I am interested less in what they said and more in how it was articulated. They demonstrated both transparency and reflexivity in terms of their sources and how they used information about the artist for particular ends, and in this way provided a means of reconfiguring reflexivity in the reception of art. In order to make her comic book series Wireman applicable for young people of color, for example, Stauffacher is committed to the idea of collaboration and crowd sourcing when developing the comic’s story. By inviting her readers to respond to previous issues of Wireman and propose new ideas for the comic’s plot and characters moving forward, she relinquishes part of her creative authority and ownership of the story, and in the process sets an important precedent for future translators of the Philadelphia Wireman and other artists.

Expanding on Jane Bennett’s theory of assemblage, which emphasizes the vibrant and malleable relationships between human and nonhuman agents and in the process decenters the human within social and political discourse, I propose a similar crowd-sourced approach to art, which is not only aware of the multiple active networks between human and nonhuman agents within the reception of art, but embraces transparency and reflexivity of those circulations. As a mode of intervention within practices of exhibiting and writing about art and artists, this would focus more on accumulating rather than restricting and concretizing possible responses to any given work of art. In this way it aligns with the centering practices for which my project ultimately argues. A crowd-sourced approach to artistic reception may take a variety of forms in the future. I exercised one aspect of this approach by establishing a dialogue with Chris Luther and Dominie Nash throughout my project and leaning heavily on their own observations and insights. Many artists have a great deal to say about and through their work, and scholarship, exhibitions, or other sites for discussing or viewing their work would benefit from a stronger
focus on their expertise and what art communicates beyond categorization. Drawing from the ethics and methods of collaborative ethnography, these practices will continue to be instrumental in future art historical and material and visual culture research, scholarship, and curatorial practices.

Another aspect of a crowd-sourced approach, however, has less precedence, but involves, whether through digital or other published means, an open, flexible, and ongoing exchange between the people making, writing about, selling, or otherwise presenting art to the public. This process will hold all accountable for the information they put into the world about artists and their work, as well as the ways in which that information is disseminated. My project revealed the necessity of recognizing art and artists’ complexities beyond previous translations, and this includes my own. By crowd sourcing and cultivating an open dialogue that is continuous and accessible, this approach holds the potential to destabilize unmediated positions of expertise and authority that many scholars, curators, and others involved with art and its reception have long inhabited. For this reason, mine is an ongoing project of both uncovering the work of artists on the margins of fine art canons and democratizing the reception of art making and makers through more expansive and collaborative research, writing, and exhibitions. I hope that someone else will see the work of Chris Luther, Dominie Nash, and the Philadelphia Wireman in a museum or collection or encounter my or others’ interpretations of their work elsewhere, and likewise approach them through a completely new set of aesthetic and ideological lenses, unique to their present social, political, and material moment.
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