

## *The Art of Not Making: The New Artist/Artisan Relationship*

by Michael Petry

London: Thames & Hudson, 2012  
(ISBN: 978-0-500-29026-2). 208 pp.

Sophie C. Kromholz (University of Glasgow)

*The Art of Not Making* is eye-catching – a beautiful compilation with unusually high-grade images. The author, Michael Petry, is a multi-media artist who has written extensively about a range of contemporary practices and issues within the art world. In *The Art of Not Making*, Petry presents a discussion around the dynamic relationship between artist and artisan and the issue of authorship and validation in the production of art.

Petry discusses and likens the change in the role of the artist from ‘artistic genius’ who creates by hand to that of the mastermind director orchestrating ‘from the sidelines’ (p.6); the contemporary artist lacks the technical ability to physically execute his/her work, and must therefore delegate the physical labour. The changed role of the artist is problematic as it challenges the qualities defining the artwork. The collaboration between artist and craftsman, and where it places the final product, raises the question that lies at the core of this book – artwork or craft, what determines the object’s status?

The root of the debate lies in Renaissance Europe, where artists were cast alongside ‘men of intellect and enquiry’ (p.7) whereas craftsmen were considered mere manual labourers; the defining distinction came to rest upon usage. A functional object was a piece of craft, whereas ‘a work of art simply existed to be itself’ (p.7). Petry goes on to state that this only became more formalized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the emergence of state-sponsored academies. Although Petry’s argument for the higher esteem enjoyed by artists over craftsmen has some merit, the debate presented has been simplified, as “useful” objects including religious objects and tapestries also held great esteem during the Renaissance. The simplification of cultural context is further noticeable in Petry’s comments on gender, where Petry argues that the arts belonged to the male dominated world and crafts to women. There were

many esteemed crafts dominated by men and women during the Renaissance and after, e.g. metalwork (male dominated) and embroidery (female dominated). Surprisingly, much later, Petry goes on to laud the Renaissance textile industry. This is one of many little idiosyncrasies where the author initially builds an argument only to counter his previous statements with conflicting information.

Throughout the book, Petry's core argument is that craft and art are separate. They have made contact throughout history, but the new artist/artisan relationship is perhaps not so new. Petry notes the occasional exception where artists returned to physically working with mediums, such as the interest in ceramics that took place in the 1950s, and the development of 'the studio glass movement' of the 1960s (p.13), but these are discussed as brief flirtations. In spite of these experiments with physical production, Petry argues again and again, through his selection of modern and contemporary artists, with Marcel Duchamp as the champion behind this move, that the artist eventually moves away from physically labouring art.

Petry first introduces Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) as an illustration of the new artist/artisan relationship. The so-called *Fountain* consisted of an appropriated urinal, dubbed *readymade*, proclaimed to be an artwork. *Fountain* challenged the notion of the artist's role and whether he or she needs to physically produce the object, or simply needs to devise the concept behind the work. Duchamp was one of the early proponents of *nominalism*, which provocatively proposed that if the artist says it is an artwork, it simply is.

Petry follows up his analysis of *Fountain* with Duchamp's later work *Air de Paris* (1919), in which the artist employed the expertise and ability of a pharmacist. The concept, not the craft, was the artwork. With works such as Duchamp's *Air de Paris*, the concept of 'the modern fabricator' (p.9) – Petry's term for the specialized craftsman employed by the artist to complete a specialized task – was born. The role of the modern fabricator is rarely acknowledged or credited. This, Petry concludes ironically, countered the intentions of artist's like Duchamp, who tried to de-deify the artist. Despite removing the artist's hand from the artwork, alienating the idea of the artist as skilled worker, the artist became further elevated as the ultimate authority on conceiving and 'authorizing' the artwork (p.9), in some ways an affirmation of the earlier idea of artists as 'men of intellect and enquiry' (p.7). The removal of required

skill, as promoted by Duchamp's practice, only increased the artist's significance, as an artwork could now simply be the idea as conceived of by the artist. This is also where we find the root of conceptual art.

From here Petry leads us into a summarized list of artists who used conceptual art to evaluate and challenge the role of the artist and the definition of art. Although Duchamp's role should not be underestimated, Petry runs the risk of overstating it by resting the majority of the development of the new artist/artisan relationship on Duchamp's influence. This seems too simplistic. If Petry had been more inclusive with his examples, instead of choosing a single front man, the reader would be given a more nuanced and realistic impression.

In most chapters Petry moves along the timeline of creative practice quite rapidly e.g. in his chapter on metal we begin at 7000 BC, and a few paragraphs later find ourselves in the 1950s. Although there is something to be said for giving a concise summary of any development, it is not difficult to see that Petry has left a considerable amount out. It is understandable that an author will frame examples around their argument, but it is difficult to reconcile the scarcity of examples, given the breadth of time included.

Petry has made his case by including a deceptively large time scale – deceptive, because so much is left out that little can be said about it – and singles out one artist as the driving force behind the current artist/artisan relationship. In doing so, Petry leaves out many contributing art movements, including the avant-garde movements predeceasing Duchamp, as well as his contemporaries.

In essence the book provides an excellent fast forward overview of the core discussion surrounding the development of the artist/artisan relationship which would enable a starting point for the curious layman or beginning art history student, but it leaves something to be desired for the initiated art historian who is unlikely to have learned anything new, but is likely to have found a number of important contributing artists and movements missing.