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Zoe Wulff

*Vassar College*

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*The Theory of Living Intimacy: An Exploration of Crafts as Media and Intimacy  
as Mediator*

Zoe Wulff  
April 26, 2019

Media Studies Senior Thesis

Advisor: Thomas Porcello

For Dad and inspired by my Aunt Brenda and all  
the crafters who came before me.

## **Table of Contents**

Craft and Art .....	5
Connection and Craft .....	9
Living Intimacy .....	11
Intimacy as Mediator .....	14
Representations of Craft and Living Intimacy in Media .....	16
How Understanding Intimacy Affects Systems of Value in Other Media Objects	17
The Commodification of Craft .....	23
Conclusion .....	25
<u>The Audio Quilt</u> .....	26
The Listening Guide .....	28
The Music .....	29
The Questions .....	29
Final Reflection on Audio Quilt .....	32

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Finally I would like to thank my mom for helping me maintain myself through all of this.

## **The Theory of Living Intimacy: An Exploration of Crafts as Media and Intimacy as Mediator**

(Craft) establishes direct correlations between material transformation and social congregation. Instead of a concern with labour, the question of craft now seems to be synonymous with our engagement with matter and everyday life. This transformation marks less the disappearance of craftsmanship after the end of art than its development into a general media literacy.<sup>1</sup>

Craft is an expression of love to myself and to those around me. Love as I am using it is, “a combination of care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect.”<sup>2</sup> Sometimes big projects like a thesis start with a theoretical question or phenomenon. For me it began with trying to understand why something I love can be so misunderstood by academia. I started by wondering how do I make others not only see how much feeling goes into craft, but how much feeling comes out of crafts, too. And then I thought, what if I make my own piece of work that let other people tell about their emotional experiences created and expressed by craft. In my journey to understand the feelings and meaning of crafts, I have found that I can better understand how the emotional resonance of a crafted object functions within leading aesthetic frameworks. These guard against modes of accessible creative expressions and thus, I can see how the tension between the emotional intimacy of crafts, the stratified framework of Art, and the consumerism of mass media.

### **Craft and Art**

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<sup>1</sup>Sjoerd van Tuinen, “The Cosmic Artisan,” in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, ed. Robin Van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Thimotheus Vermeulen, (Rowman and Litchfield International, 2017), 70.

<sup>2</sup>Bell hooks, “All about love.” (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001) 7-8.

In the first chapter of Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction*, he describes how taste is upheld. Taste, which (to me) seems to be another word for the hierarchy of western aesthetic, is the stratification of culture based on class fractions. Bourdieu lays out a chart of research he has done that classifies people's musical and artistic leanings. There is a clear leaning toward what each class faction enjoys, showing the hierarchy of taste. Nowhere in his work is anything but fine art referenced.<sup>3</sup> Sjoerd van Ruinen credits Giorgio Vasari with "Sanction(ing) the divide between art and craft or between the major and minor arts in order to save the aristocracy...constitut(ing) art as a field of intellectual knowledge."<sup>4</sup> This points to the origination of art becoming legitimized and craft as part of the commoners work. Although this helps me understand how western aesthetic is upheld, it doesn't necessarily define the contemporary western aesthetic.

I can conjecture based on my own observations of the world that the hierarchy of western aesthetic begins with popular culture created by mass media, "communication technologies that have the *potential* to reach a large audience in remote locations."<sup>5</sup> This baseline of western aesthetic presents the expectations of our society to reach as many people as it can, making it largely accessible to people of all education levels. The next level of popular culture are the privileged pieces of media. Institutions make some of these less accessible financially and intellectually, moving them out of popular culture and mass media. Institutions such as museums, film festivals, The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and networks like Showtime and HBO sit in this category. Each thing can be interacted with, but for a higher price.

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<sup>3</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, "Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste," (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) 16-17.

<sup>4</sup>van Tuinen, "The Cosmic Artisan,"71

<sup>5</sup>Robert L. Mack and Brian L. Ott, "Critical Media Studies: An Introduction," (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014) 3.

Often these institutions are made with the expectation that viewers will engage more critically with them. The next rung starts to get into academia, fine artists, and classical music. At this level of the hierarchy there is deeper engagement expected. One learns the ins and outs of trajectories and histories. Taste as described by Bourdieu, is completely subjective, based on the leanings and learnings of the elite who are highly educated, wealthy and maintain easy access to cultural capitals such as New York City, Los Angeles, or Paris. Everything we as a society engage with becomes highly classed based on how the elite feel about history and experience. Western aesthetic is thus, constantly in flux subject to tokenization, fetishization, and other avenues of domination obtained by the elite based on cultural aspects of the lesser strata.

Crafting is just beginning to reappear in popular and more elite spheres of culture with the DIY movement which encourages people to craft and create on their own, the focus on mental health and the psychological benefits of crafting, and craftivism, with knitted pussy hats and crossed stitched clothing that act as an act of opposition to the current political climate. Because of its regrowth in the bottom rungs of western aesthetic, some are trying to understand it better. I thought that because of this it would be easier to find answers for what makes crafting its own being. However, the more I search for the answer, the more I understand craft as plebeian and often intensely emotional is misunderstood.

Some want to divide craft in half, calling the pieces that fit into a western aesthetic, “Art,” and assigning the rest as an amateured other, in other words “Craft.” However, it seems antithetical to me to put craft in a hierarchical structure like art. Participation occurs outside of a hierarchy. Yes, there are competitions with ribbons and judging, however, based on my own research, most people want to pass on their knowledge and skills in a way that uplifts and

supports their fellow creators of every skill level, unlike artists who look for savants to pass their knowledge to. Craft is currently sitting in a liminal rung of the western aesthetic. It is understood as an act of common people, but there is a fascination with fabric and textile art in the art world with work like “the eye’s level” by Anne Lindberg and artists like Judith Scott and Faith Ringgold.<sup>6</sup> Instead of trying to understand craft for what it is, tastemakers want to define it within their own terms.

The list of definitions seems to be endless with little agreement from one scholar to the next. On the one hand Arthur Crystal defines it as, “an extension of personality, residing in the tension between temperament and the manner in which temperament expresses itself.”<sup>7</sup> In other words the craft relies entirely on the emotions of the creator. Alternatively, Peter Betjamman looks at Peter Dormer’s definition which relies on the idea of skill and discipline being the crux of what makes a craft, leaving out any idea that emotion is involved.<sup>8</sup> The work I have found that has helped me most to begin to forming my argument has been Larry Shiner’s philosophical exploration of the boundaries between craft and art. Shiner looks at craft from multiple angles. He explores craft as discipline or as a set of practices, looks at craft and its relationship to design, and identifies the differences between craft practices.<sup>9</sup> Despite his extensive research in each area, he does not begin to touch on the emotion and intimacy in craft. My working definition of craft relies on its usage as a verb. My research has brought me to many articles on crafting better business models, emotional health or friendships. This verb points to intentionality in an act.

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<sup>6</sup>Anne Lindberg, “the eye’s level” (ANNE LINDBERG, 2018).

<sup>7</sup>Arthur Krystal, “Art and Craft,” in *Agitations*, (Yale University Press, 2002) 108-109.

<sup>8</sup>Peter Betjamman, “Craft and the Limits of Skill: Handicrafts Revivalism and the Problem of Technique,” *Journal of Design History*, vol. 21, no. 2, (Oxford University Press, 2008) 183.

<sup>9</sup>Larry Shiner, “‘Blurred Boundaries’? Rethinking the Concept of Craft and its Relation to Art and Design,” in *Philosophy Compass*, (2012), 230-244.

This intentionality combined with the handmade use of certain materials instill pieces with love. However, it is the craft's living intimacy that continues to imbue the craft with its new and expansive meaning.

### **Connection and Craft**

Through my own experiences with crafting and discussions with other crafters I've identified four possibilities for connection in craft work. The connections are: direct community with other crafters, recipients, family/ancestors, and internal. These ways of connecting speak to the expansive nature of craft. The human connection in crafting is part of what makes crafting unique. By understanding the different ways people find connection in crafting, one begins to see the different threads that ties crafters together. This intimacy between crafters drives the intimacy in the object itself by speaking to the many people who have been a part of bringing the craft to life. It is rarely just about the maker and the receiver but about the larger community surrounding both.

To begin my research I reached out to a group of women who sewed together weekly. By allowing me to enter their own community I was able to begin to build my work and audio quilt. They spoke openly and honestly with me about their experiences as crafters and what their group does for them and those beyond themselves. While talking to these women who meet in their church basement, many spoke of the community they had built amongst each other. The group encouraged the members sewing and was a place for them to practice new techniques with help close by. According to Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush, these spaces have belonged to women since at least antiquity. They also claim that the realities of these spaces were often overlooked

by those portraying them, favoring instead a sexualized image of women laying about.<sup>10</sup> This image has disguised the constant hum of movement and conversation in these spaces. The busyness of a room is not a rush to finish or be better than anyone else, but the constant rumble of collaboration and support for everything that is made to be the best a person can offer. Instead of the stereotype of a haram these spaces have a deep sense of community filled with the uplift of each person supporting those around them.

Beyond the support of the crafting community, the intimate work that goes into a craft is often thought out with a person in mind. This is especially true in quilts where the pattern and colors are picked based on what the maker thinks will represent the receiver best. The intimacy of the gift is then enhanced by the very nature of handmaking the craft. Time given to a craft is time given to the recipient. The women I interviewed felt the deep tenderness toward those they were creating dresses for despite never seeing anyone receive their work. They knew that somewhere in the world there were girls wearing their dresses making their work feel worthwhile simply in the ideal that it was out there being appreciated.

I have found, through my own intimate creations, that when crafting runs through your family lineage, ties to past and present creators come alive, as well. My interests in crafts have always been inspired by my family. In my interview with the group of women, I found that many of them were similarly inspired by and felt the ties between the crafters in their families. One spoke of her mother's skills in crochet. Others spoke to their grandmothers' abilities in making clothes. While the specific craft was different, the act of crafting for others a was practice common amongst the women and those that came before them.

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<sup>10</sup>Jack Z. Bratich and Heidi M. Brush, "Fabricating Activism: Craft-Work, Popular Culture, Gender," in *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 22 No. 2 (Penn State University Press, 2011) 237-238.

An increasingly important and talked about form of connection in crafting is the internal connection people find through crafting. Sinnaka Pöllänen found that crafting helps makers, “express and work through his or her feelings in an active manner and simultaneously take steps towards finding a solution.”<sup>11</sup> Crafting allows a person to spend time with themselves while working through stress, grief, and other issues. Crafting gives the maker time to work through their problems with an outlet so that processing doesn’t become overwhelming.

### **Living Intimacy**

Stuart Hall’s theory of encoding and decoding is a helpful tool for thinking about the living intimacy of a craft. Encoding is the meaning that a maker of a medium puts into an object and decoding is the structures of meaning that the viewer, or in the case of crafts, interactor, brings to viewing a piece. Often when the structures of meaning are different there is a tension between the creator and the interactor.<sup>12</sup> In crafting, there will always be an understanding from one crafter to another of the process and love that is put into an item. More often than not I found in my interviews that anyone who knows a crafter intimately recognizes this as well. But the disconnect happens when someone no longer appreciates and recognizes the time, effort and emotions that go into a craft. Those that understand what is put into a craft are an intimate interactor, they decode the thing that makes it special by understanding the process of how a craft is made, even if they don’t know the details of the whole story. A regular interactor, someone who’s decoding of the object or medium doesn’t allow them to see and appreciate the crafts intertwining with the maker, sees less value in the object. Their remove from the intimacy of the

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<sup>11</sup>Sinikka Pöllänen, “The Meaning of Craft: Craft Makers’ Descriptions of Craft as an Occupation,” in *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, (Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2013), 219.

<sup>12</sup>Stuart Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, (1993) 94.

object leads to and is fed by their engagement with western aesthetic as opposed to appreciation with a source of intimacy.

Alice Walker wrote a short story called *Everyday Use* that touches on the ways that a familial quilt changes meaning based on the decoding by two sisters. One, Dee, wants the quilts to cherish and act as a symbol of where she came from. Maggie, the other sister, has been promised the quilts made from her grandmother's clothing. Maggie claims that she doesn't need the quilts to feel connected to her grandmother because she has spent hours with her grandmother learning the craft. The girls' mother decides that the quilts will stay with her keeping the intended use upheld by the new interactor.<sup>13</sup> In Walker's story, Maggie, who is able to understand the maker's intentions, maintains the emotional intimacy. Although, there is nothing wrong with hanging quilts, many quiltmakers do just that, Dee clearly doesn't have a grasp on the quiltmaker's purpose for making them. She is disconnected from the origin and purpose embodied in the craft. The tension in the story arises because of Dee's claims over pieces of her family's lifestyle to showcase as part of her aesthetic in a more modern life.

Part of the living intimacy of a craft is that a person can become an intimate interactor by developing a relationship with the craft. Crafts have the ability to be present for many aspects of different people's lives. The origin of intimacy relies on the relationship between maker and receiver and sometimes even on the relationship between the material and receiver, but the intimacy can shift for other people the more they interact with the object. Crafts hold memories in a way only an object that is used in the everyday can. People have the opportunity to build a relationship with an object. That object can then hold the essence of a time place or person. It can

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<sup>13</sup>Alice Walker, "Everyday Use," in *Quilt Stories*, ed. Macheski Cecilia, (University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 174-182.

represent a feeling, a moment. If a craft holds these lasting memories in its physical being, its relationship with a person becomes intimate, holding parts of that person's life.

To think through this relationship I like to think about a pillow I have in my apartment. My aunt made the pillow for me as a Christmas present, and a matching one was made for my brother. The center of the pillow is a flower-like design made of ties. The ties were my father's who passed away earlier that year. I have a deep attachment to the ties in the pillow as they hold such a strong essence of my dad. I then have an added layer of intimacy knowing my aunt made this to help me hold onto pieces of my dad. It's obvious to anyone who looks at the pillow that there are ties in the pillow but for most that doesn't imbue significance. For most people, the pillow is just a pillow. However, that pillow has become a part of me and a part of my apartment. For some of my close friends the pillow becomes a representation of me and the parts of our friendship that grow at my apartment. The pillow could also have stories I'm not aware of. Someone could have connected that pillow with a memory or feeling that I was not involved with. Living intimacy of an object means that objects can constantly change meaning depending on the interactor. Only those who just see the pillow as a pillow remain a stagnant interactor.

If crafts used in the everyday are important in the creation of living intimacy, so then is the fact that they are made in everyday instances and settings. Crafting, according to Pöllänen, is often used as a way to get through hard times. It helps people deal with physical illness, anxiety, depression, and grief.<sup>14</sup> An object can be the physical embodiment of someone coping. Pöllänen finds in her study that many objects are simply made as a motivator for everyday life, she calls crafting, "an organizer of daily routine."<sup>15</sup> She finds that through both of these motivational

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<sup>14</sup>Pöllänen, "The Meaning of Craft: Craft Makers' Descriptions of Craft as an Occupation," 222.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 221.

starting points people are ultimately connecting to a deeper sense of self.<sup>16</sup> The crafted object can not be separated from this journey. Without words, the object holds the emotions and personal growth of the creator. The process through which a craft is made and the moments it lives through with its creator are just as important as the moments filled with meaning by any other interactor.

In Sinikka Pöllänen's article, "Elements of Craft that Enhance Well Being" she claims that, "as an activity, craft is based on both the intellectual and physical characteristics of the maker."<sup>17</sup> I have always felt like a craft was something that existed as signifier of the makers everyday because crafters frequently craft while doing other activities. They, like the woman I saw at the salon this morning, get their hair done and crochet while the color sets. They, like one of my mom's bosses, knit in meetings. They, like I do, sit in class and applique pieces together. Some people have studios, but most bring craft projects with them, it travels through the mundane moments of life. But, a craft is not as simple as a mindless activity, like Pöllänen states, it becomes a piece of who the maker is.

### **Intimacy as Mediator**

Robert L. Mack and Brian L. Ott describe media as the, "indirect channel" that information is disseminated through.<sup>18</sup> The authors then go on to say that mass media, "(is) first and foremost communication technolog(y) that increasingly mediate(s) both what we know and how we know."<sup>19</sup> If craft is the medium then intimacy is the mediator of all that the object holds

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 221.

<sup>17</sup>Sinikka Pöllänen, "Elements of Crafts that Enhance Well-Being," in *Journal of Leisure Research*, Vol 47:1, (2015), 60.

<sup>18</sup>Mack and Ott, "Critical Media Studies: An Introduction," 1.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 2.

inside. Without intimacy a craft is only what it presents itself as, the pillow is just a pillow.

Unlike so many other mediums where mediation can happen through an image or words, crafts are only understood through the stories and history that can't be seen or understood without an interpreter of intimacy, someone willing to share the story of why it matters to them or someone else or interaction with the craft in emotionally intimate moments and/or over time.

Crafts also can be a symbol of larger structures combined with the interpersonal. For me quilting is a part of my heritage. Many people in my family have quilted for generations. The quilts I own represent this history as well as the larger history of quilts in Appalachia. The quilt on my bed isn't just a quilt, it is a quilt that was made for me with this history rooted in it. The quilt on my bed holds so much more information than just pieces of fabric. It, as a medium, acts as the intermediary between my life in college, my familial history, and my aunt's representation of all of that. Intimacy is the mediator that translates the extensive meaning of one quilt in my life.

There is a unmatched intimacy between maker and receiver like that between Maggie and her grandmother. Crafters in their deep understanding of the ritual and therapeutic nature of crafting are almost always intimate interactors. Casual interactors can become intimate interactors. The story of a craft grows and continues beyond any one person. Dee has her own intimate understandings with the quilts, but it's hard for her family to see the way she is connecting. We don't always understand or even respect the way people choose to treat crafts. There sits this hard line between wanting to preserve something so special to an individual and wanting to respect the purpose of an object to be used. Intimacy is hard to grasp when it isn't acting as a clear mediator. As much as any one person wants to define how crafts are used or

understood, the common denominator in a craft is to know that it holds the stories of people who have built a relationship of living intimacy with it.

### **Representations of Craft and Living Intimacy in Media**

In December of 2018 The Try Guys, a group of Youtubers with their own channel, released a video that chronicled them learning to knit and then spending a weekend knitting a secret santa gift for one of the other Try Guys. While none of the guys are completely negative, it is clear that some of the guys are looking forward to a weekend of knitting more than others. Slowly, as the time goes on and the guys learn who they are making their gifts for, each one gets more enthusiastic about their projects. The video shows how frustrating it can be to learn to knit, how hard it can be to just finish a project. The viewer gets to follow each on their journey knitting the small gift. At the end of the clip the guys exchange gifts and the pure joy can be seen on each of their faces as they not only receive the handmade gift, but also as they watch the others' reaction to opening the gifts.<sup>20</sup> The twenty minute clip shows how hard it is, even for those who were cynical about the exchange, to not be affected by the intimacy of having something crafted for them. The gifts aren't perfect, but you could see how touched, especially Eugene and Ned were to receive gifts that had so much thought put into them. The video looks at the most basic levels of living intimacy. It represents the first exchange and how powerful the relationship can be between maker and receiver.

The Try Guys are just discovering the intimacy and emotional aspects of crafting, but in *How to Make an American Quilt* (Moorhouse, 1995) the experienced crafters know the depths of

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<sup>20</sup>The Try Guys, "The Try Guys Try Knitting" Released December 2018, (Los Angeles CA: 2ND TRY, LLC.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4gRYEjizQ>

expression and meaning in quilts. The film is a series of vignettes that expand upon the design each woman in the sewing group puts in the quilt being made for Winona Ryder's character, Finn. Each of the quilt blocks are an expression of the women making it and the important memory explored in the vignettes. While the women are sewing and throughout the movie they share their stories, sharing pieces of themselves and subsequently the stories of the quilt. When they finally finish the quilt, Finn wraps herself up in it.<sup>21</sup> It symbolizes the way the women around her have embraced her entirely even when they don't understand the choices she makes. The expression of storytelling in one quilt speaks to the ways intimacy lives in the simple making of a quilt. The movie highlights how circles of women can connect across difference and conflict to come together to create something with meaning. It digs into the depths of what it means to create and how crafters connect to each other and to those they create for. The quilt can be seen continuing to live its life in the last shot of the movie as it becomes part of the reconciliation between Finn and her fiance.<sup>22</sup> Finn is adding her own story of love and life to the quilt growing closer to the women around her simply through allowing their work to become a part of her life. The movie examines how a quilt can have multiple lives and how each of those lives can be connected to the people close to it, highlighting the impact of living intimacy on all those who interact with one object.

### **How Understanding Intimacy Affects Systems of Value in Other Media Objects**

Natalie Pendergast claims that diaries have no climax, choosing rather to go into the

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<sup>21</sup>"How to Make an American Quilt," directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse, (Universal Pictures, 1995).

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.,

characters development through small snapshots of their everyday life.<sup>23</sup> Understanding the crafted object as a diary is an easy step forward when thinking about not only the everydayness of the object, but the way that crafts contain memory. The diary often causes frustration to a reader because it doesn't hold the entirety of a person's life. The writer gets to pick and choose what is important to explain based on a stream of consciousness without later edits. They open up about what they are feeling, not as a way to self promote, but to have a place that holds pieces of their lives and an expression of their feelings.<sup>24</sup> Diaries become important when they are able to be contextualized. Everyone understands the historical context of Anne Frank's diary, that and her impressive narrative structure have made her diary become a piece of history and republished countless times for people to read and analyze as a not only a historical document, but as part of the literary canon. While Anne's diary isn't necessarily tied to living intimacy, some can have an intimate relationship with it if its is a part of their own reckoning with a family history or connected to an important time of their life. However for most diaries they, like the craft object, aren't filled with context that act as mediator. They are, "like lacework, a net of tighter or looser links that contain more empty space than solid parts."<sup>25</sup> The way to understand them is to understand the context and like a craft object it requires intimacy with the piece to know the larger story. Because society deems it more important to know the larger contextualization of a moment than to understand what that moment, however mundane, meant to a person, the diary is constantly brought down as an object of less common approachability. It reaches fewer people in

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<sup>23</sup>Natalie Pendergast, "Traces of Subjectivity: The Embodied Author in the Work of Ariel Schrag" in *Graphic Details: Jewish Women's Confessional Comics in Essays and Interviews*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers) 111.

<sup>24</sup>Phillipe Lejeune, "The Diary on Trial," in *On Diary* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2009) 153.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 153.

a more impactful way and is written off as a lesser form of literature because of it.<sup>26</sup>

Living intimacy also speaks more broadly to people's relationships with other media forms such as televisions and movies. Film and television criticism and esteem rely on scales of how skillfully made or creative the movie is. People who have gained the position in the film industry to judge the quality of a movie get to decide the marketing and release strategies and the reviews all of which reflect how film industry insiders believe the movie should be privileged; whether the movie thrives or dies, whether it is for the elite or mass audiences. Despite the decisions being made by elite tastemakers, every person has their own relationship with certain forms of media, a relationship that can't be quantified or qualified by any system of rating on a larger scale or even in comparison to someone else's intimate relationships. Shows and films can mean a lot to a person because of who they watched it with, when they watched it, who recommended it, or who they bonded with over common love for it.

There are movies and television shows throughout my life that are intrinsically tied to people or moments. Over the summer while my dad was in the hospital *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again* (Parker, 2018) came out in theatres. The first movie of the series was marked as my favorite movie in my sixth grade time capsule after watching it in theatres with my brother and a bunch of older folks who sang along to the whole movie. My memorable experience viewing the first movie left an impact on me and, thus, I had counted down the months until they made a sequel. During one of my dad's good days my brother and I left the hospital to go to the theatre to see the movie. Watching Sophie, the main character, deal with the loss of her mom while revelling in the joy of life and singing and dancing to "Dancing Queen" made all the emotions I

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 147-165.

was dealing with feel amplified (Parker 2018).<sup>27</sup> When we returned to the hospital we proceeded to tell everyone the entire plot of the movie. It was more about sharing something filled with joy in such a depressing place than about the actual movie. For months after my dad died I couldn't watch the movie; it felt too close to his passing and memory. My relationship with the film became a piece of my dad's passing. I have since rewatched it and added new memories with friends and in new places. My love for the movie is attached to the strong emotions tied to a pivotal moment of my life and to moments of joy and community with friends. The film tops my list of movies not because it was cinematically outstanding, but because it holds memories that I keep close to me that can't be measured by anyone else.

Academia shies away from talking about how media finds meaning outside of taste. The intimate relationship people have with media objects aren't necessarily a reflection of the object itself, but it does add value to it. On a larger scale it is hard to predict this phenomena, outside of national tragedies and broad shared experiences because it is hard to predict when any one person will form an intimate relationship with a media object. However, society can embrace a work that touches on an intense moment of collective horror and sadness. In 2002 Wilco released their album "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot" to immense praise. Pitchfork claims that, "no one is too good for this album; it is better than all of us."<sup>28</sup> The highly acclaimed album spoke to more than just one person's sadness over a broken heart. In 2009 Pitchfork makes the claim that the albums' resonance with 9/11 was what earned it the #4 spot on a list of the best albums of the 2000's. The writer states, "The real story was the resonance of elliptical songs like 'I Am Trying to Break Your Heart', 'Ashes of American Flags', and 'Jesus, Etc.', which often reduced crowds

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<sup>27</sup>"Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again," directed by Ol Parker, (Universal Pictures, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> Brent S. Sirota, "Wilco: Yankee Hotel Foxtrot," Pitchfork, Conde Nast, (2002).

to hushed silence once 9/11 attached a real world frame to Tweedy's cryptic lyrics."<sup>29</sup>

The way public perception can be shaped by national tragedy can also be seen in PJ Harvey's 2000 album, "Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea." When the album was released there were mixed reviews, some well respected critics loved it and others of the same caliber were not enthused by it. Despite Pitchfork's lack of praise for the album upon its release, the album was later placed in the same list as "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot." Like Wilco's album the justification for the acclaim was tied to its ability to express the feelings of many Americans after 9/11. In defending this Pitchfork says, "Unfortunately, history added another level of spookiness to the album. After 9/11, Harvey's reminiscences of romance on the streets of Manhattan and Brooklyn took on a previously unimagined sense of dread. It just isn't possible to hear 'This Mess We're In,' with duet partner Thom Yorke singing 'Can you hear them?/ The helicopters?/ We're in New York,' the same way again."<sup>30</sup> The living intimacy of the album gave it new life with more a in depth meaning on a larger scale where the collective experience of a nation seemed to be understood in an album written originally with different meanings.

In moments of intense grief and reckoning society's collective minds look toward someone to express the pain everyone is feeling. It looks for someone to tell them why or how. People have an intense yearning to know people's truth when it comes to tragedy. Both Wilco's and Harvey's albums were written before 9/11 even happened, however they feel as if they offer insight into a world that feels different or incomprehensible. They express the happiness of the before with the confusion and anxiety of post 9/11. This creation of new meaning give the albums new life, tied closely to the emotions felt by many. This new emotional life is where the

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<sup>29</sup> "The 200 Best Albums of the 2000's" Pitchfork, (Conde Nast, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid..

living intimacy of each object rests. It is the agent giving the album a new meaning and allowing it to live this next life. Like the association of a movie to an intense memory these albums become a way of tying people to the feelings of the past. But unlike that one person's memory imprinting on a film, both albums existence is tied to the collective memory of a national tragedy. These albums point to the impact living intimacy can have on valuing an object when enough people or even just the right people feel it.

The living intimacy of a media object that exists in the collective memory of society is no more important than the living intimacy of an object that is only tied to one person's experience. In thinking about Bourdieu's break down of taste, the idea that an object can be valued simply by the experience a single individual has with a media object puts pressure on the structure built to maintain cultural hierarchies.<sup>31</sup> The living intimacy of a piece of media subverts the belief that value comes from the hierarchy assigning it. However, it is not just the average person who can evaluate objects based on their relationship with it.

Critics can also hold things in higher regard based on their associations with the object. This happens with the critic in the movie *Ratatouille* (Bird & Pinkava, 2007). He comes to the restaurant to try the food and the ratatouille reminds him of his childhood. This simple reminder shakes the foundation of his critical empire.<sup>32</sup> Although, the cartoon is simple in its explanation, it is important to see the impact a personal relationship with an object can have in the way a person, especially one of higher cultural capital, can affect the value assigned.

This can also be seen by the way renowned movie critic, Roger Ebert sometimes reviewed movies. The critic built up a fanatical following of his film reviews. For some, his

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<sup>31</sup>Bourdieu, "Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste."

<sup>32</sup>"Ratatouille," directed by Brad Bird and Jan Pinkava, (Disney Pixar, 2007).

reviews were the deciding factor on whether they saw a movie or not. In 2011 Ebert wrote a review of *The Tree of Life* (Malick, 2011). In it he claims, “I don't know when a film has connected more immediately with my own personal experience. In uncanny ways, the central events of "The Tree of Life" reflect a time and place I lived in, and the boys in it are me. If I set out to make an autobiographical film, and if I had Malick's gift, it would look so much like this.”

<sup>33</sup> Ebert's love of the movie was less about its appeal and more about his own feelings of nostalgia and connection to what Terrence Malick was putting in it. Ebert had the authority after a long career to judge the quality of a movie. Nobody questioned whether his feelings of nostalgia had an influence on his feelings about the quality of the movie instead the movie's ability to incite such emotions were the markers of its quality. The movie was received well broadly, but Ebert's own connection and sense of nostalgia are what lead to his more poetic response to the movie. Ebert's status within the hierarchy of the film world gave him the power to cite an emotional response and powerful memory making as enough to make a movie worth seeing. His relationship with the movie was what gave the movie power, not the movie itself.

### **The Commodification of Craft**

Although much of my research and admittedly my interest lies in the sphere of craft making outside of monetary exchange, it would be a disservice to my understanding of craft in the modern world not to look at the increasing commodification of handmade crafts. It is now easier than ever to buy and sell crafts. The internet offers many spaces for the craftmaker and consumer to interact. The largest and most well known site for this is Etsy. Etsy is a site for

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<sup>33</sup> Roger Ebert, “The Tree of Life,” Roger Ebert.com, 2011.

independent sellers to set up shop. One writer and crafter set up shop on Etsy in 2006. She says that Etsy began as a place for, “independent crafters who were already established IRL.”<sup>34</sup> Slowly, Etsy began to allow sellers of mass produced products to utilize the website, maintaining Etsy’s huge income, while making it impossible for those who make handcrafted objects to sell their products at a rate that supports their business.

Between the images of conditions inside factories and the realities of pollution and waste in fashion industries, people are turning to ethically sourced clothes and goods.<sup>35</sup> The problem is that for many people ethically sourced shops are more expensive than their mainstream counterparts. It naturally takes more money to produce goods that don’t rely on low wages, pollution and machine manufactured details. For many, buying through makers on Etsy was a way of shopping ethically. However, the prices keep many people out of this new cultural practice. To reach those who couldn’t afford to participate in the stratified practice, the market started making items that looked like the ethically produced craftwork. Scarves began to look like those one could buy from Ten Thousand Villages, a store that acts as a go-between for Western consumers and the small village crafters of the rest of the world. This production made crafted goods more popular, but also corrupted the idea that craft was something handmade.

Towards the end of Grace Dobush’s article she claims “the maker’s identity becomes secondary, if noted at all” by the branding of Etsy as one entity.<sup>36</sup> The commodification by Etsy as a branded identity, rather than a site for independent creators completely usurps the relationship between the maker and receiver. In place of intimacy lies corporate money and the belief that intimacy can be replaced with the visual suggestion of it. The craft doesn’t even

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<sup>34</sup>Grace Dobush, "How Etsy Alienated Its Crafters and Lost Its Soul," on Wired, (Conde Nast, June 2018.)

<sup>35</sup>"The rise and rise of ethical shopping" on The New Internationalist, (2017).

<sup>36</sup>Dobush, "How Etsy Alienated Its Crafters and Lost Its Soul."

depend on the maker; it relies on the *idea* of its handmade-ness creating the value of the object. Not only are the objects not handmade, but they are being separated from the intentionality, the process and mental state of purpose, of a craft.<sup>37</sup> While this is happening with increasing frequency on Etsy it is also happening in marketplaces that are more publicly tied to mass production like Amazon. The maker is intrinsically tied to the intentionality of an object; they are the ones who instill purpose to the object. While the machine can produce an object to be used, the object can't be crafted by the machine. Thus, the popular, commercialized aesthetics of craft exists in its building of capital rather than in the appreciation of the object, relationship, and process of a craft being brought into this world. It becomes less about the expression of love and intimacy with the object and more about what the object projects to the world about its owner.

## Conclusion

There are many ways of understanding how an individuals' intimate relationship changes the meaning of any object. Individual stories can't be known by all and it's not the point that everyone should know every story. Crafts force us to acknowledge that it's more important that it becomes acceptable in contemporary western aesthetic for objects to be valued for the relationships they have with people. Craftwork demonstrates that value can be had outside of a hierarchical system of evaluation. Crafts can have value because of the way meaning is created in each object through the living intimacy and separate from larger structures. Diaries can have meaning for the relationship between writer and who ever has the historical blanks filled in or cares solely about the feelings of the author. Movies can matter because they helped a person

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<sup>37</sup>Cathal O'Madagain, "Intentionality," on Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

cope with death. The relational aspects of media objects outside of structural understandings help people find meaning in a world that is hard to deal with. They help people find comfort, joy, and love, but also frustration, sadness, and anger, creating memories that will forever be tied to that object and can only be known by understanding the intimate moments and details of one's life.

### **The Audio Quilt**

The origin of my thesis lies in the idea of an audio quilt. To mimic a quilt structure, the audio quilt will have light and dark sound categories. The sounds representing the light part of a quilt were the conversations I recorded in communal crafting spaces. They focus on the joy, laughter, and quiet support that can be seen amongst a community of crafters. The recordings that represent the darker parts of a quilt are from the twenty-one interviews I conducted. They are the richest source of information, getting at the thoughts and feelings of different crafters of a variety of ages, from college student to retirees in South Western Virginia and The Hudson Valley. All the interviews will be edited into smaller sections (pieces) to mimic the darker pieces in a quilt. I have edited my twenty-one interviews into shorter clips. From the 232 clips I originally had, I chose the clips that I felt got to the heart of my thesis. The clips were then put into eighteen groups of four that were edited so that none of the groups are longer than two minutes. I did my best to have each of the clips in the groups differ in topic and speaker. In between each group, there is a clip from one of the group crafting spaces I recorded, which acts as the lighter color part of the quilt and boundary between interview groups. All of the recording I have done is with an audio recorder, but there is a visual component so that crafts and aspects of crafting can be seen and the audio quilt can feel more cohesive. The visual aid will follow

along with the audio to give it better shape. I used the groupings of pictures that coincided with each section of interviews to make the picture quilt at the beginning of the video. It isn't an exact visual of the video because there are nineteen sections including the end and I needed 20 crosses to fill the pattern.

The audio quilt form allows me to interact with craft by, not only mimicking one form but allowing the voice of crafters to be heard. It is important to me that the depth of emotion and passion be represented. It feels necessary that audio is used for this so that individual crafters can express in their own words their feelings and thoughts on their creations. The quilt form simultaneously represents the commonality of craft while interacting with the questions surrounding the form outside of its traditional sphere. The form of the audio project itself is helping me to interrogate some of the questions being asked by my project. I will be doing a showing for my thesis at Vassar. My hope is that the audio quilt doesn't only live one life. I want it to be an object that can be engaged with both academically and personally. I have had so much incredible help by people from Virginia to New York to Minnesota and Washington. I want each person to see what they helped create. As I have claimed throughout my thesis, crafts aren't meant to be stagnant objects, and I hope the audio quilt gets to live a similar life of meaning. This also fits into the tradition of craft which is why I don't want to have my project sit only within the bounds of academia. Exploring emotions is important to me and I really want an emotive element to my thesis.

By claiming my audio quilt as a craft, I am pushing the bounds on what can be defined as craft. In the growing digital landscape, it seems disingenuous to not recognize some of the similarities between audio works and craftworks in their intentions. When I started out, I thought

that I would be limiting what a craft was. I struggled understanding what my own audio work would be. However, the more I understood crafts, the more I realized that craft is not about material; it's about creation and affect. It all comes down to whether a work has intentionality in its creation. Does it have a purpose other than just to be seen or understood? This then connects to whether an object can have living intimacy. For my audio quilt my hope is that it speaks to many people who understand crafting, but I also hope that it speaks to those who don't see it the way I do. I hope that it reveals the world of crafting and its power, love, and support.

### **The Listening Guide**

#### Names By Appearance

Saski- Recorded at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY  
 Ruth- Recorded at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY  
 Mars- Recorded at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY  
 Martha and Jane- Recorded in Franklin County, VA  
 Brenda- Recorded in Alleghany County, VA  
 Frankie- Recorded at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY  
 Elianna- Recorded at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY  
 Claire- Recorded at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY  
 Ethel- Recorded in Roanoke, VA  
 Charlene- Recorded in Poughkeepsie, NY  
 Clare- Recorded at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY  
 Anita- Recorded at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY  
 Allison- Recorded at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY  
 Bonnie- Recorded in Roanoke, VA  
 Gae- Recorded in Stone Ridge, NY  
 Jessica- Recorded in Roanoke, VA  
 Kota- Recorded at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY  
 Micki- Recorded in Roanoke, VA  
 Pam- Recorded in Covington, VA  
 Sarah- Recorded in Roanoke, VA  
 Sue- Recorded in Roanoke, VA

Craft Groups by Appearance

Roanoke Modern Quilt Guild- Recorded in Roanoke, VA

Vassar Women's Center "Learn To Knit"- Recorded at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY

Crafternoon- Recorded at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY

Art 366 with Guest Speaker Anita Jones- Recorded at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY

**The Music**

To represent the quilting that goes through the entirety of a quilt so that the quilt and all its layers stay together, I decided I want music to run through my audio quilt. I want it fairly consistent throughout so that it doesn't distract from any of the other audio pieces, but contributes to the emotional intimacy. I had some of my friends get together and improvise music to go in the background. This touches on the emotional intimacy of someone making rather than just having a commercial relationship with the music. I also have another original piece from my uncle in the piece to add more people from my own life into my creation.

**The Questions**

The interview questions are mostly about one's relationship with crafting and the crafts made. The questions were created to better understand why people still craft and why it is such a rich source of connection amongst other crafters, between giver and receiver, and to familial history. I tried my best not to lead those I was interviewing in any one direction. The interview format was influenced by an oral history workshop I took with the the Oral History Summer School. The purpose of taking from this format was so that I had less control over how those interviewed answered, thus getting a more honest and personal take from each individual. The answers to these questions were used to build the audio quilt. More than half of the people were

taught by a family member or someone close to them. Because of this I began with those that spoke to this experience. Having these answers layered together to begin the project makes the project begin with a view of this one small moment of similarity amongst the vast number of experiences in crafting.

*How did you learn to (specific craft)?*

For me the starting point of each person's experience is how they've learned their skill. I had assumptions that many people learned from family members or other important figures in their life. In crafting, an important connection is made when you first learn. It is starting to change now that the internet is offering tutorials, but I wanted to see if for many they had someone who first helped them explore crafting.

*What do you do with the pieces when finished?*

I wanted to know if people kept their pieces or gave them away. Is crafting more a way for them to connect with themselves, or is it a way of giving some of themselves to another?

*Where/How do you get inspired to start a new piece?*

Getting motivated to start a new project can be hard. For someone who is about to put many hours into a piece I want to know what drives them to begin this process all over again.

*What is the most memorable piece you've made? What made it so memorable?*

I had a theory that the memories would be tied to people or the difficulty of the piece. I wanted to know what makes a piece memorable. What makes something so important that it sticks with someone?

*Why do you keep crafting?*

Crafting can be incredibly frustrating and expensive. Finding motivation can be hard. In my research I have found pieces that talk about the psychological benefits of crafting, but I wanted to know if people were tapped into that or if something else drove them to continue.

*Can you describe what it feels like to give a piece of your work?*

I am trying to find out whether giving a piece away makes crafters proud and happy or is there a sense of anxiety having something you made being passed on to someone else. Or even does it feel like a part of the crafter is missing when they hand over a piece. Why do people make things for hours on end only to give it to someone else?

*Why is crafting important?*

I can research all I want to know about the benefits and downfalls of crafting, but I want to know why those who craft think it's important. By providing an open ended question, the crafters were more able to explore their own personal reasons or give broad societal analysis.

*What does it feel like to finish a piece? How does the process feel?*

I wanted to know what it feels like to work on a long term project that has proven benefits for mental health. How does it feel to create an object from almost nothing?

*What happens to the emotional intimacy of an object once the creation story is no longer a part of it?*

I got really stuck on this question while I was working. This question addresses how a crafter thinks and feels about something they've made after it's not theirs anymore. Do crafters still feel ownership over the object? Do they care how the object is treated? Do they have hopes and dreams for it? Is it still important to them after they finish making it? It has been interesting to hear what people think about their crafts past the life they imagined for it. This question pushed my own theories to dig further and understand crafts better.

*If in a group: Why join a group?*

This question touches on how people feel about crafting with others. Do they find a sense of connection with those around them or is it just to have people who encourage them to keep working? What makes quilting groups continue to meet? Why isn't craft just a solitary activity?

### **Final Reflection on Audio Quilt**

I found creating my audio quilt incredibly frustrating and rewarding on a personal, academic, creative, and spiritual level. I relied heavily on the words of others to build my project and, thus, experienced a fear of lacking enough content for the quilt and a fear of having too much. Not having full control of the project made the project feel like my worst nightmare at

points, but I knew that I didn't have all the words needed to express the depths of what I knew to be true. This seems to be in line with many of the crafters I spoke to in groups who relied on others' skills to help them grow as crafters. In January before I even really began assembling the quilt, Jane and Martha, who I interviewed, were telling me about the call they often make to their community to come and help them quilt on the frame in Martha's home. One of the people who was with me asked if they let even someone who didn't have small, clean stitches sew on the quilt. Martha replied that she made the call and accepted help from anyone who was willing; knowing that every stitch good or bad became a part of the quilt and a part of its history. This struck me as incredibly poignant so I took it to heart in regards to my own project and applied that approach. My audio quilt holds a piece of every interview I conducted. While I went in with the hope that the crafters I met would reflect my own ideas and theories on craft, I knew that not every answer I got would get at what I was going for. Sometimes it was simply because the answer wasn't as descriptive as I wanted it to be and other times it just wasn't completely relevant to the aspects of crafting I was focusing on. Despite a multitude of answers everyone had something to offer and everyone had a deep connection to the creating they do, which was easily captured on audio.

Other than figuring out what went in my audio quilt and how it was all going to fit together, the most frustrating part was adjusting for the different sonic spaces. So many of the interviews I did were in different spaces and, as much as I tried to adjust for it, there are still pops from people hitting the table with their hands, the hums of different rooms, and even the bell on a dog collar. When I listen, sometimes all I hear are the mistakes I made in the recording process. At this point I feel disconnected from the emotional flow of the project. The pride in

knowing that I created it is still there, but I feel like many of the people I talked to who said they were ready to give their pieces away when they were done. I'm ready for it not to just be mine anymore.

Listening back to the piece, I feel fortunate that people were so forthright with me. Somehow something as simple as talking about crafting was made into these snippets of intimacy. The people that I interviewed opened themselves up to me, allowing me to be the keeper of their words about something they love. The act of interviewing was really intimidating to me, but listening back, it makes me realize how helpful it was to put myself on the line in meeting with and talking to people I didn't always know. The interview may have only lasted ten to fifteen minutes, but I feel like one learns a good deal about who the people are in the audio quilt. You can hear in their voices how much they care for and love what they do, and I am so genuinely grateful for their willingness to be vulnerable and thoughtful while talking to me.

Despite the many moments of doubt in my abilities to interview, record, edit, etc., I found a sense of empowerment and joy working on the audio quilt. Anytime anyone said anything insightful, it was thrilling knowing that would get to be a part of a patchwork of thought. Each step I finished felt like a monumental moment in the whole project. There is something terrifying in inviting people to listen or see what you've committed time, effort and passion to. I had to push past so many of my own insecurities to set up interviews, create the piece, and show it publically. Despite my words missing from the audio quilt, it feels like the whole of it is a representation of my life for the past year. There is so much in the audio quilt that people won't know and I love that it gets to go live so many more lives than I can give it by myself. There will

be moments of intimacy that will pass some people by, despite this it will be cherished and will continue to grow in ways I cannot control.

So I will finish this with same words that end the audio quilt: I want whoever holds (this) next to know that it was made with love for them by me. May it wrap whoever you are in the warmth and love of those who craft. May you understand the joy, peace, frustration, vulnerability, and love put into every craft.

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